RIVER NOVEL &
COMPLEMENTARY DISCOURSES

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ABSTRACT

The complementary discourse explores the function and value of narrative and why mankind seems to have always seen events, connected or unconnected, as stories. It investigates how we process and perceive fiction and compares narratives found in non-fiction, police witness statements, films and diaries to consider why the human brain seems hard-wired to transform events into narrative.

The accompanying novel, *A River,* is set in Manchester over a three hundred year period. The events in the chapters are presented in reverse order; from the 1990's to the 1720's, beginning with the chronological end of the tale and working towards the starting point. The chapter's regression highlights how a familiar location is constantly in flux and sometimes shares little with the same place of the past.

Time and location are both treated as characters, playing important roles in the personality of the city. The buildings and streets, events, food and language have all been researched for accuracy, either first hand or using diaries, films, maps and photographs. The novel occupies a grey area between fiction and history.

The narrative actively avoids the traditional novel formulas of historical fiction and magic realism and is intended to be an accessible experimental novel, questioning the idea of what a story is.

A River: Novel

When the ice began to melt, the water searched for the easiest route to take. It flooded, engulfed and found its way lower and lower as if starving and in search of food. Then there was a river. A deep and powerful torrent of cold water, which carved its way ahead.

The river ran before there was anything for it to run through. It gushed under, over and through untamed land, trees, plants and debris until it joined another river, crashing into a steep rocky place where the two met.

The area swarmed with life, through decade after decade after decade and the living things gave little regard to the passing of time. Small groups of families arrived, who cleared and worked the land, the best they knew how. They made fields, stone walls, wooden bridges, timber homes and created ponds by channelling the river. The river was too powerful to be moved though. The dwellers had arrived onto its territory and had to live with its ways.

The people brought horses and cattle, ducks and chickens. They gouged muddy pathways where they walked, over and over again. They built stronger, sturdier houses out of stone and daub from the nearby lake and their nameless tracks spiderwebbed out further and further as more feet travelled them.

People liked to name things, so the dirt tracks between the crofts were given names, the fields and ponds were given names and suddenly, people owned the names, owned the land around the river. They rented it, leased it, bought and sold

leaves of paper, which proved they owned stretches and sections of it; divided the old pieces and renamed the new pieces. Wells were dug, springs were found, churches were built, windmills erected, people were born and buried, footsteps from the place where they had lived. And the place, which wasn't a place before, now was. And a river ran through it.

The clusters of houses became a community, a location, a hamlet, villages and then a town. The people were much the same as people everywhere, they drank and fought and laughed. The wildlife pulsated and overflowed so much that even a blind hunter wouldn't have gone hungry. There were trout and eels in the river, boar in the forest, otters, weasels, storks and heron. And this place, was Manchester. And a river ran through it.

Dear Baby, I'll have to call you that as you don't yet have a name. I would like to tell you how lucky you are to be alive. I have to tell you lots of things, about how you came to be born, and why you will live. I know this is a doomed plan to begin with though. By the time you are old enough to understand and appreciate what I have to say, I will have long since left this world. Thinking ahead has been part of my life for so long now, but I have not yet solved the problem of how I can get these sentiments to reach you in twenty years' time, when you will be more inclined to understand the implication of their contents. I would like more than anything, for you to see how important some of the things I have to say are. I understand, perhaps better than anybody, that our actions and what we promise have enormous effects on our families, and I want you to be aware of that too. The things you might say flippantly always have consequences and an aftermath.

On the day you were born, your father, Keith Serrah had taken the train from Rochdale to Manchester. I was in the same carriage as him, three or four seats away and when he got off, I was following a small distance behind. He looked white and sickly that day. He stopped every few hundred yards to catch

his breath. This was most fortunate for me however, as I had reached an age where my body no longer kept up with the pace of my mind or of other people. Walking had become strenuous a long time ago and it had been decades since I could muster the energy to run.

I must tell you before I continue, that your father didn't know me, but I knew him. Perhaps better than anyone. It's highly unusual that I should be writing to you, whom I don't know, about your father, who never knew me and who nearly never knew you too. Everything about my life is unusual. To me, normality itself is an unusual thing.

That day, I could see the look on his face, I saw it on the train. I'm sure that he wasn't thinking, as he should have been, of your impending birth. He didn't seem to be contemplating marriage or your mother either. I'd seen the nervous look on his face before to know what he was thinking.

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Keith Serrah was slouching on an aisle seat, nursing a visibly bad hangover. He was pale, sweaty and nervously looking out for the ticket inspector, who was making his way towards him with the casual glee an inspector has when they know they are about to ask for a ticket which does not exist. As the inspector sauntered over, he was suddenly distracted by another passenger in the next carriage. He looked at Keith, lifted a finger in the air and told him he'd be right back. Twenty seconds later

the train pulled into the dilapidated splendour of Manchester Victoria station and Keith made a swift exit, walking away but stopping every few seconds to breathe the cold air and mop his brow.

1994 had been a bad year for him, but this year would be different he told himself. ‘Everything will be fine’, he said out loud. He headed for the exit and walked along Todd Street and sat on the steps of a closed shop. He put his right hand in his jacket pocket and produced a wad of money. He flicked at the edges of the notes, held together with an elastic band. For a few minutes he’d experienced clarity, but now, he felt that events were being swept downstream faster than he could keep up with. He sighed.

His gaze wandered from the money to the discarded chips on the pavement in front of him, then to the gravel car park opposite, the cars crawling down Fennel Street, above the buildings and to the tip of the cathedral peeking out over the roofs. Only then was he was reminded of the purpose of the money. What it was supposed to be for.

Supposed to be for. The words echoing round his head. There was still plenty of time for it to be taken to its rightful place. Keith stood up, but didn’t start walking. He felt still felt nauseous and peered through the window of a jeweller’s. Shutters down and all valuables removed from the display, there was nothing to look at except price tags. He was thinking ahead. Far ahead. Thinking that, if, by some chance he didn’t pay the caterer, then Kelly would be furious and no doubt call their wedding off. The jeweller’s large hand-painted sign announced they paid good prices for gold. Why would he need a wedding ring if he wasn’t getting married?

“Change?” said a feeble voice at his feet.

He looked down at a bundle of sleeping bags and stolen hospital blankets and spotted the top of the homeless man's head.

Change. He wondered if *he* could change. He ignored both questions.

"Happy New Year then, ar'kid," the voice said burrowing further into the dirty blankets.

He was thinking of other things that could happen in the next few hours, dreamily imagining the sweet clatter of casino chips, the comforting rhythm of cards being shuffled. He was inhaling the plumes of cigarette smoke which would drift in front of him and tickle the back of his throat as he sat looking over at the warm glow of the cashing-in window. Not that he ever frequented that side of the casino. The usual pattern was that he doubled his money, lost a little, lost a little more, until he was back to where he started and then, in an attempt to double it again, would lose it all. It was the trap that lured him and every gambler in the building. Hope. The hope of winning. No matter how futile things got, it was always theoretically possible to win it back. And if he lost everything, he told himself he wasn't really to blame, luck was just against him.

He was at his most pathetic upon leaving the casino. As he collected his coat from reception, he would always give the staff a wide fake smile, intended to signify that he hadn't lost any money. As he reached out for his coat, he would mime the action of dropping a coin in the tip bowl, flicking the coins already there with one of his fingers to create the impression a coin had landed.

He quickly forgot about this as he waited for an empty, faded, orange 135 bus to go past. He watched it thoughtlessly and then crossed the road making his way over the virtually empty car park towards the Corn Exchange. He tried to recall the real reason he had come to Manchester and dismiss the fantastical musings of his

over excited imagination, choosing to forget the bad choices in his own personal history. If he didn't remember them, they hadn't happened.

Looking at his watch, he realized he was early, too early to meet surveyors or pay caterers, so he casually peered in closed shop windows; used vinyl shops, second-hand books shops, antique medals and war memorabilia. He wondered for a second who bought such rubbish.

He sat on the battered mosaic steps of the Corn Exchange entrance and breathed deeply again, fearing the churning of Guinness and Glenfiddich in his stomach would make an unwelcome appearance at any moment. More steps brought more litter and he kicked the crisp packets, empty lager cans, cig ends and receipts, sweeping the area as if clearing his mind. Brush away the present dilemmas and go back to other times. The words of the homeless man rang in his head. Our Kid. He never thought of himself being someone's child. He had no memory of his father. In fact, any conversation with his grandmother concerning the family tree was like gazing into a muddy pool. Depending on her mood, she said that his grandfather was killed or disappeared or ran off, like his father before that and his father before that, or so the stories went. His concern wasn't with the rubbish of his past though, it was with the future. He stretched a leg and kicked the debris further away.

The cellar entrances to the building housed more sleeping homeless. Keith noticed one of them wriggling out of his sleeping bag and stood up to avoid being asked for money again. He wandered into the building and straight past the small stalls and shops in various stages of opening, past racks of new and old clothes, Peruvian hats, joss sticks, vinyl, replica assault rifles, foreign coins and assorted junk. He passed it all and headed for the exit doors on the opposite side. People shuffled around unlocking doors and setting up their stalls. The domed glass roof amplified the

sound of cardboard boxes being dragged across the wooden floorboards and the noises echoed and reverberated through the cold building, awaking a pigeon that had taken up residence somewhere high up inside the structure.

He exited the building, closely followed by an old man. His hangover told him that he needed a bacon barm and he followed his nose outside again to the grimy looking Sorrento café, took a red fixed plastic seat, and started to tuck into a steaming limp and greasy snack.

Keith sipped a watery tea from a chipped mug and sighed. A few minutes later, under the belief that the bacon barm had cured him of his hangover, he stood up, looked at his watch, took a deep breath and vowed not to waste the money he had in his pocket.

He left the café and made his way through quiet streets, walking down Hanging Ditch and a narrow cobbled road with strong strides. He heard a crunching noise and looked back to see the squashed remains of several snails he'd just trod on and caused a cluster of pigeons to flap in panic out of his path. He crossed the road again, looked at the jeweller's with defiance and carried on down Corporation Street trying to mentally recreate the map he'd been shown at the office a week before, glancing up at street names.

Amongst the Victorian buildings stood a handful of older buildings and dozens of enormous, cheap and hastily constructed 1970s monstrosities. The city skyline was a clutter and clash of architecture that resembled a party with no dress code.

He paused for thought in the middle of the empty road where Long Millgate bled into Corporation Street. He stood on the patchy tarmac with sections of cobble peeking out from underneath and smiled. The marriage would change him, he thought. It would be the beginning of a new Keith Serrah. He would be a father and

even though he wasn't entirely sure what a father was supposed to do in a family, never having had one, he started to imagine what he intended to do for his child.

He crossed the railway lines and decided the first thing would be the opposite of his own missing father; he would always be there. He tucked in a piece of shirt flapping out of his trousers and thought more about this first promise. What exactly did 'always be there' actually mean? Obviously he couldn't always *always* be there for his offspring. That would be ridiculous and stifling. So, would 'in the evening' suffice? During school holidays? At weekends? This would have to be cleared up at a later date, he decided. Being a father was already tricky and he hadn't actually become one yet. But soon, it would happen. He would be married *and* become a father. This would create two new Serrahs; his soon to be wife and the baby. After idly lumbering along for generations, his tatty, dog-eared family name would soon triple. This made him think of stakes and winnings and he shook his head as if to physically flick the thought from it.

Kelly was a week overdue. Any day now, he would become a father. Any minute, he thought. In fact, as he lifted his foot to take the next step, the preceding step could have been the first step as a father. He might never know the exact point he became one unless he was physically in the hospital with her. It was a slightly unsettling thought.

He crossed the road again and made his way down the blackened brick staircase to an enormous patch of waste ground where one of his work colleagues stood, wearing a small a rucksack. The man's face was familiar but he wasn't sure of his name, it was something forgettable like Neil or Richard. He too looked hung-over.

"Alright, just you then?" he said, strategically avoiding the name problem.

“Yeah, everyone’s cried off it seems. Too many Christmas parties. They fight about overtime and then no bastard shows up.”

Keith nodded to himself. He was amazed he’d been able to haul himself out of bed the way he’d been feeling earlier on. It was only the lure of the city and its casinos that had convinced him in the end. It was Manchester’s fault, he told himself. On the other hand, if there had been no casinos, he would never have dragged himself out of bed just to pay the caterers and do some overtime. Trying to get everything done at once was how he lived his life. Killing many birds with the same stone. Kill the birds and put the stone back in your pocket and use it again to kill more things with later on, was his motto, which he intended to shorten and make a little snappier. Work, pleasure, personal matters all smashed on the head with the same bloody rock.

The two men paced around the patch of land, skirting around an abandoned Ford Fiesta with its doors wide-open, tape machine ripped out and glove compartment contents scattered nearby. They talked about work reluctantly. What should have been a site visit with a photographer, architect and flock of project managers was over in a few minutes. Keith didn’t care what kind of apartments they were intending to build there. He didn’t think that anybody would ever want to live in an area overlooking an ugly industrial estate, a prison, endless streets of derelict buildings and a shabby railway station.

When he left, he became lost in thought again and instead of re-entering the station, meandered through back streets to St Peter’s square before stopping at a phone box next to the war memorial. He fished in his pocket for two ten pence pieces. Thoughts ran through his mind. Thoughts of winnings and the stack of baby things he would probably buy with this non-existent, hypothetical, imaginary winnings. Fleeting

thoughts with no depth other than distracting him as he dialled and waited for Kelly to answer. It wasn't Kelly who answered though.

"She's what? When?" he cried, adding, "I'll be right there."

This wasn't entirely true. After all, that too was a debatable term. 'Right there' meant instantaneously. Nobody could achieve that tall demand. The trains were regular, he thought. Kelly would be with her mother anyway, so what would be the harm in arriving half an hour later? And with that thought, he crossed the road and entered the casino housed in the basement of the hotel.

True to his regular routine, he left the building fifteen minutes later with considerably emptier pockets, bitten nails and a sheepish look on his face. As he moped along, an old man shuffled towards him, blocking his way on the footpath and muttered something which meant absolutely nothing to Keith.

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Dear Baby, I'd grown accustomed to watching. I watched your father as he ate in the café. I saw him fumbling with a large roll of money and sighed to myself. I stood around in the cold waiting for him to leave and once he did, struggled to keep up with his pace. I watched from afar as he talked to another man. They were looking disinterestedly at the empty piece of land hemmed in by ghost streets. By this, I mean the streets had no buildings on them, they were simply names. Survivors from another age.

The men saw the future when they looked at the land. I saw the past. You, no doubt will see the present. It's strange how three souls think of the same place in three different ways.

It's difficult for me to disconnect from these streets and places. They have been a part of my life for as long as I remember and sometimes their passing is like losing a friend.

This is not important to you or your father, but it is close to me. This was the place where I grew up. Where my home used to be. To their right was the Irk, a place which was not really a place. It came from somewhere and went somewhere else. The river dedicatedly flowed next to a stretch of empty road called Scotland. It wasn't even privileged enough to be called Scotland Street, just plain, old one word, 'Scotland'. In front of them Verdon Street and Fernie Street, two more locations which existed in name only, having both, somehow survived without having any buildings on them. To their left was Adeline Street, the final piece of the desolate puzzle; waste land, patches of cobbles from the past, gravel, dirt, kerbstones, weeds and nothing.

I knew how Keith made a living and shook my head about the situation. Forgive me for sounding like the very old man that I am, but it was somehow amusing that situations repeat themselves. Sixty years before in the same place, stood the last dilapidated slum houses which were being demolished in order to build factories. At the time, I'd stood slightly teary eyed as the sweaty workmen pulled down most of the timber-

framed houses, with no regard for the history the buildings held. Oak beams were tossed aside onto piles of burning waste. Some of the huge pieces of wood were carved with the dates they were erected. Numbers and initials once proudly displayed over the entrance to the homes of their creators and owners. JE 1607. AY 1594.

But we find ourselves always in a time where progress means progress and there is no room for quaintness. Only when something is gone do people get nostalgic for it, and so they were all torn down. Fifty years later, these ‘new’ buildings suddenly became old and were torn down and the cycle was about to begin again, I surmised. The men with the clipboards were preparing for battle and your father was one of them this time. I’d seen this scene many times over the years, as far back as the Town Hall or the stations going up; men ticking off buildings and streets and consigning them to history.

After a while, Keith left the patch of land and I had a fair idea where he was heading, but again, his youthfulness eluded me. I lost him at the corner of Toad Lane and shuffled along, cutting down Cheapside and Pall Mall, trying to catch up with him. When I finally caught sight of him, he was on the tram platform putting coins in a payphone. I walked right up to him and listened to his brief conversation as if I was waiting to use the phone. It was then apparent that Kelly was in labour or the baby had been born. I let Keith walk away and leave me to my own devices and fumbled with the phone and coins, in

order to find out more facts. Which hospital exactly? I had prepared a list of possibilities and began to call them one by one, to glean the piece of information on which your life depended.

I was growing weary of it all by this stage I must admit. Weary of living, weary of chasing, weary of hiding and avoiding and sneaking and evading. I was a walking skeleton, emaciated, weak and begging for this all to be over and Keith to become a father.

I guessed right first time and after speaking to several people, I was transferred to the maternity ward.

“That’s right, she’s just been brought in,” I said to the woman on the other end of the phone. I could hear commotion and echoing voices in the background while she asked a colleague. As I waited, Keith made his way over the road and into the casino, taking a guilty look around before he disappeared down the stairs.

“It’s her grandfather, no, please don’t disturb her, I just wanted to know if she was alright and-” The nurse babbled away for a moment, “Oh that is good news, you say hello from me then, thanks, bye.”

I put the phone back and sighed. No doubt the Nurse passed on my message to your confused mother, whose actual grandfather was dead, but I no longer cared. I followed Keith’s steps, releasing my grip on the gun in my coat pocket and descended

into the bowels of the casino. I spotted Keith at a table stroking one of his eyebrows, unaware it was all over.

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Keith played roulette, which he believed to be infinitely more complicated a game than poker due to the element of chance and not skill. Eyebrow stroking always preceded the sneering. There was a look of scorn on his face as he eyed the old Chinese men, dutifully scrawling the winning numbers pads. Keith shook his head slightly when he saw this behaviour. They thought they could see a pattern in the random nature of a ball falling into numbered slots. He also shook his head at the moronic businessmen, who walked from table to table, throwing five hundred pound rectangular chips onto single numbers. These faceless suits walked away immediately and hardly ever returned to find out if they had won. It was a waste, he told himself in some form of twisted logic. They were wasting five hundred pounds and not even staying to see it get lost.

He, on the other hand, had an almost religious system. Not based on odds or statistics, not based on how the croupier threw the ball or how many times a number had appeared. His system was based on his own personal probability, or rather the fact that he'd had so much bad luck in his life, it was now, right now, all about to change. This moment was his moment. The god that he didn't particularly believe in was watching over him now.

To test this wave of invincibility he threw a single fifty pence chip onto the table, not even caring where it fell. The croupier looked annoyed.

"Where's that supposed to be?"

Keith nudged it a few millimetres until it was clearly on Even. And in came number eight. That was Keith's test. He would do four more of these tests. At worst he would lose two quid. Next he chose Odd. The calming sound of the smooth silver ball began and for the six people around the table, the world ceased to exist. Ash fell onto the felt, some held their breath. Seven.

Keith turned to the old Chinese man next to him and gave a respectful nod. Respect to the number seven, not the man. The man likewise checked his list and nodded back. Keith next placed all his faith on two chips simultaneously. Red and Even. Despite his concentration, he and several of the other men got momentarily distracted as a woman appeared and smothered the table with dozens of chips. The coloured pieces of plastic covered all but three numbers and Keith lost all sight of his own chips. She was ruining his concentration.

"No more bets."

The ball fell and Keith watched the armfuls of chips disappear down the hole at the end of the table and the croupier calculated the winnings. It really was all about luck, and he was lucky.

The faceless croupiers hands gracefully pilled and stacked, shuffled and slid the towers of tokens around and alongside a flurry of exclamations in Chinese.

With his preliminary quad of fifty pence bets all winners, he took a deep breath and pushed eight enormous stacks of chips onto the middle dozen. He was actually going to win. He would be able to appear at the hospital, see the little bundle of good news and shower it with money. Flashing through his mind came a memory from when he was nine years old, one of the first risks he'd taken. Betting his bicycle that he could jump further than all the other kids. As soon as the words had left his mouth, he wondered why he'd said them. He wasn't particularly athletic, he wasn't the tallest

of the kids either, but the idea of winning other kids' bikes had seemed more desirable than losing his own. His mind had been drawn to the challenge and that his world, at that moment, was about to change. He'd felt invincible, it was exactly how he felt now. Omitted from his memory, as he sat in the casino, were the long walk home and the lies he'd told his mother about where his bike had gone.

That was then and this was now though, the two moments weren't remotely similar, he told himself. It was near impossible for him to lose. He would win, pay the caterers, make up some vaguely plausible reason to explain the money, treat Kelly to something nice, put a deposit on a house or a car, the possibilities were endless, they were-

"Number eight black," said the croupier as he shovelled everyone's chips down the hole and for the two hundredth time of his shift said, "Place your bets."

Keith stood up made his way to the door, leaving with nothing.

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Dear Baby, This is going to get complicated now, so I'll go back a bit further. It may take a long time because it's a long story. Trying to remember your own life in a linear fashion is difficult; trying to remember the ins and outs of someone else's is even more so. Things do not always lead somewhere; the trajectory of everything seems to shoot off in different directions, but I will attempt to tell you about all the things I feel you need to know, to the best of my memory.

Thinking of your birth and your father naturally makes me think of my own father. The facts of my birth were recounted to me by him on a number of occasions, with how much accuracy, I can't be sure. It was a story I loved to hear and when he told me about it I would crouch, tuck my legs underneath my body, huddle closer as my father whispered the magnificent details, like they were a closely guarded secret.

I was a special baby, he told me. Magic things happened on the day of my birth. As soon as I was born, the neighbour who helped deliver me held me up and told my mother I was a boy. Instantly I repeated the words, "Es ist ein knabe," with startling clarity. She nearly dropped me with the shock, I was told.

Then, stunned at hearing a new-born baby speak, she turned to my mother and asked in her native tongue, "Did I imagine that?" and in turn, I repeated this too. My father heard the raised voices and rushed into the room thinking there was something terribly wrong. He too witnessed me repeating the exclamations, slightly slurred because of my tiny tongue.

In German the nurse said, "This isn't possible."

My father, who had been pacing round outside the house protested, "Why not? A parrot can repeat something it hears, why not a baby?" like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And so, I came to be treated as an extra special infant for a few months. The problems began soon after that. I was

underdeveloped and when it came to food, I shunned everything except milk. The doctor told my parents I was exceptionally tiny for my age and would not live beyond a year. He was wrong. He was magnificently wrong. He suggested feeding me up so I could grow strong, but as the months went by, I spat out the soups my mother made and remained tight lipped as they tried to feed me morsels of bread, blobs of mashed up turnip or slivers of meat dipped in butter.

My parents persisted though. I was their only child and they feared losing me. They constantly tried to find things which I would not spit out. They soon discovered I refused anything which had been cooked. All they could get me to eat was raw fruit, goat's milk and certain vegetables such as carrots, tomato and salad leaves. The more people advised my parents to build me up with meat and broths, the more insistent I was not to swallow them.

So I, the special baby, became the special child, who after a year was not only repeating things but having full conversations with people. I was able to convey my dislike of cooked foods and tell my mother which things I liked to eat quite clearly.

The doctor would call at our farm from time to time and would shake his head, "It is most unusual. His limbs are healthy but small," was his useless conclusion. My father insisted that whatever I wanted to eat I would have and began

to grow new things for me. I managed to survive on honig, kohl, birne and fenchel despite the doctor saying it was impossible.

I didn't grow very quickly and at six years old I was extremely small and frail. Although I could talk, I couldn't walk as I still had the physical appearance of a baby. The doctor again shook his head in despair telling my parents I would die soon, I could not survive on the type of restricted diet I ate. My father pointed out that the doctor had been saying I would die for six years and I was still alive. He continued to feed me whatever I wished and ignored the doctor. I remained in bed, light-headed and weak.

My parents remained optimistic. My mother would repeat the same words over and over; "He is a tiny waif of a child but seems happy, he'll outlive the both of us."

She carried me through the fields of our farm, where I watched father work and would be placed on a blanket by the stream so I could see the fields and the river flowing by.

Father would sometimes take a break and come and sit with us to have lunch. With fascination, I watched him eat the slabs of cold grey meat, bread, pickle and chunk of cheese, amazed that he liked such things, which to me were inedible. In turn, he watched me tuck into my lunch of water and sliced beetroot, carrots, herbs and honey.

Then things changed. Mother died suddenly and we left our homeland. Things would be easier in a new place, father told me. If I am sad about one thing in my life, it is that I do not

really remember her much. Aside from her feeding me, nursing me and singing old German folksongs to make me sleep, there is little imagery left floating round in my head and with each decade that passes, even this fades to a mere memory of a memory. A memory of a place across the channel, a farm in what is now Germany.

I did not really understand the reason we moved. A message came all the way from England. Each time my father mentioned it he used the phrase, ‘all the way from England’. He got someone to read the message to him and soon afterwards began selling everything he owned and making plans for the journey, which would take us both to the mysterious faraway place and to fresh air and cleaner water.

After the long and uncomfortable coach journey, we arrived in Little Horrocks and my father hired two local men to help him set up the farm and rebuild the dilapidated farmhouse we would live in. We spoke no English, but I soon saw that a glimpse of gold coin was a universal language and between gestures and mimes from father, he made himself quite clear and employed men to assist him for the next few months.

It was not so different to our old home. I watched the river go by as the men sawed wood, built fences and lifted beams over doorways. The new place gave me a little strength. The local men, who spoke with odd words, told me that it was “wha’ werin wa’er” which made me strong. I drank lots of it and

soon I found I could walk without holding onto the wall and shuffled round to see the progress the men were making.

My father found it difficult to understand the thick local dialect and after I had got over the shock that these people had a different word for every word that I knew, I listened and mimicked the noises quickly in order to help him. With each new phrase I learned, the other old words were no longer to be spoken to anyone except father. Erbse were no longer erbse, Ziege was a ziege no more. A baum was no longer a baum. What was a fluss or a strom though?

I took this storm of new information as any child does, with a shrug and continued my life. For my father it was different. He struggled getting his tongue around these new sounds. He was deceived on more than one occasion by the men who sold him timber and livestock, those who heard his accent and immediately saw his confusion and took full advantage by selling him less than he paid for. He would be furious when he discovered the deceit and grew more ruthless and strict. He would insist the deal be written in the soil with a stick, numbers scraped in the dirt so no man could deny the agreement. He arranged for me to learn to read and write in English, telling me it was the most important thing I needed to know and he picked me up and held me close to his face and told me “Lass niemanden ziehen, ohne dass er seine Schuld bei Dir beglichen hat.”

How is any of this, my own personal life story, in any way connected to you, a nameless baby in 1995? I will try to get to this point, but as I cannot tell you about your own childhood, which has not even begun, let me continue a moment with mine, in the hope of arriving at the point, in this river of life, where both our ships meet and cross paths.

By the time I was eight years old things were running smoothly. My father and a few other people ran the farm, I was well enough to wander around on my own and explore the little pockets of the surrounding forest. It wasn't all that different from the place we'd come from. The trees were similar, the air smelled similar, the houses looked similar. Soon I forgot about that place altogether.

The nearby town was a strange blur of noises and the singsong of an unfamiliar language. I would accompany my father to buy provisions. These new streets were exciting, they were filled with new smells and people and horses. I soon fell in love with this little patch of land in the strange new country.

From these streets, I watched the years go by. Slowly, like mould on fruit, the streets grew wider and the houses taller. We lived a comfortable life. We were never hungry or cold. I imagined that things would always be like this, but certain events were to lead to changes I hadn't even thought of.

I became friendly with some local boys. They were all in their twenties and lived hand to mouth. They stole, tricked,

bought and sold whatever they could get their hands on. I was a lot smaller than them and initially they assumed I was a lot younger too, that I would be naive and easy to trick or steal from. They encouraged me to gamble and I did. It was simple, as if life had been distilled to its most basic set of pathways. If you make this decision now you will win. I appreciated the lack of vagueness, the clarity of making a bet.

I remember the night I brought the violin home. I showed it my father and it sat in a corner for a few days. He didn't like the fact I'd been gambling. A few days later I found my father staring at it on his lap in its open case.

"I've been thinking about your future for some time now, how you're going to get by."

I didn't understand and stood waiting for some kind of revelation. Did he want me to gamble more?

"Although we aren't poor, we aren't rich either. But you aren't built for farming and I won't be here forever."

It was a moment of horror to me. Although my mother had gone, I never imagined a day would come when he would die too. He was a very astute man concerning practical matters. I like to think I have inherited his logical thinking. He explained.

"You need to have a profession. Something that people will always want."

I was confused. "Won't people always want food?" I asked, referring to the farm.

“Yes, but anyone can raise cows and grow crops,” he told me.

He handed me the small black case. I took its little handle.

“You don’t just make music with it. You make money with it,” he said to me.

“You want me to be a minstrel?” I asked confused.

“No, I want you to make more of these. People will always want music,” he explained.

A few days later, I entered a tiny workshop in a back alley off Long Millgate to meet the gentleman who was going to teach me my trade.

This is all long before you were born, dear baby, long before your father was born, also. How is this relevant to you? Forgive me digging so far back in time that you feel there can be no connection to your present, but there is. We are connected by a thin almost invisible cobweb strand that skirts around your father and through the city which your family are from. The acts of our elders have more impact upon our present than we realize. After much digression, dear baby, this is the point I am trying to make. The thread was beginning to unravel. It ties me to you.

On the first morning of my apprenticeship, my father told me to eat a hearty breakfast and I sat at the table and stared at the knife and fork; Chopped apple pieces, some freshly picked greens and a glass of milk with a raw egg in it. I

thought to myself that I would be learning. Could anyone remember learning to use a knife or fork? Tasks like this seem difficult and unnatural when first encountered, but soon fade away once mastered. You will do these things as I did when I was just a baby, do what has to be done and then forget about it all. When we are this young, we overcome massive obstacles like they are mere sneezes. It was like being an infant all over again during my first day with the luthier.

I remained silent. Watching, not asking. I looked over his shoulder, unsure of what process was going on or what stage of the instrument I was witnessing. In the dusty workshop, things sat waiting, like me. Waiting to be picked up, waiting, hanging from the bars and hooks attached to the beams; pale shells, shining red bodies, glossy backs, strips of wooden ribs and a thousand objects I couldn't identify or even guess what purpose they served in the making of a musical instrument. The streets outside throbbed with town bustle, but inside our building there was only rhythmical sounds or silence.

So I watched, biting my lip. He worked so intently he would forget about the cigarette on the bench and it would burn to a slim finger of ash. He was old, or rather I was young back then, and everyone seemed old. He'd give me dull jobs such as sanding or polishing. As my master napped, I prepared things for him.

In winter, the days were only as long as the sun's rays, although my father still paid the same weekly rate for the

education. My observations were short during this period; you couldn't work in the dark. I would walk home and tell my father what I thought I had learned that day and he would frown and wonder how making a small wooden box with four strings could take so long.

I sat and stood and huddled in the dusty workshop, until the mysteries stacked up and the questions burst out. Why does this varnish need to be heated? What are these granules you are melting? Why does the wood need to be soaked? What is this piece of leather for? How do you make side pieces curve like that? But my master remained strangely silent on most subjects. I studied his wrinkled face and saw no sign of what he was thinking. This was an apprenticeship in copying and we were copying a 1718 Stradivarius that he had dismantled to investigate and reproduce. He made near identical copies (albeit without the trademark signature inside) from the template. Over and over.

"You copy an excellent instrument badly and you'll end up with a good violin, no need to worry about making an excellent instrument though, they all end up mistreated and smashed in workers cottages anyhow," he told me.

Money changed hands, wood arrived, seasoned wood was taken from the shelves and in the chaos, violins were made, money was handed over and more wood was bought. A cycle with no end.

"Watch and you will learn," he said.

Observing the complex process of the planing was a simple matter, the slivers of curling white wood were a beauty to witness, like dozens of doves flowing from the plank and flying to the floor. Other things were less obvious, but I still copied them, copied the quantities of powder he put in the metal bowls, placed the candle the same distance and brushed the glue or varnish the same way he did. The line between copying and learning soon blurred and I was no longer sure what I had learned.

As the weeks went by, there came a point where I grew weary of the pace. We were working every day on multiple pieces of violins but still had not completed even one.

One afternoon, my enthusiasm wearing thin and with a headache pounding behind my eyes, I asked if I could leave early.

“You may miss the most important thing,” he muttered, almost as if he were talking to himself. What could I miss in a few hours? I’d spent hundreds of hours watching him and half this time had been spent watching him sleep. How could my education possibly suffer from missing one afternoon? I looked around at the individual pieces that had been crafted and all that remained was minor adjustments and assembling.

The next morning I learned that the minor adjustments themselves took longer than the large pieces had to shape. Miniature finger planes, like they were taken from a doll’s house, removed feather thin sheets off the inside of the

bodies, hour after hour. It wasn't until six months later that I could honestly say I had made a violin.

From a distance, it looked nearly identical to my master's. Up close, its rough near symmetrical shape was clear to see. The purfling was shoddy and the pegs rough and childish. My master played the instruments one after another. To my untrained ear, the notes they made were almost identical.

"But watch how they sound," he whispered, laying the violins on their back and drawing deeply on his cigarette and blowing the smoke inside his instrument. He bowed an open string smoothly and the smoke began to flow in smooth symmetrical patterns as it arced and floated out of the holes, like a mirror had been placed in the centre, each curl breezing by in unison with its partner. Next he blew the smoke into my instrument and bowed the same string. The smoke chugged, dribbled and disappeared in puffs and strips like a spluttering old mule.

He took the body and with a sudden wrench ripped the back off.

"You miss one afternoon," he said, reaching for a container on the workbench.

"Sand, tea leaves, pepper, it doesn't matter," he said grabbing a handful of sand. He scattered it on the upturned piece of wood, banged a tuning fork and held it in the centre of the back plate. The specks rattled and moved around like a magnetic force was making them dance. They formed strange

shapes, found where they were meant to rest as if they had minds of their own.

“This side here is good. This side needs to match it though,” he said pointing at a finger plane and leaving me staring at the shapes as he put his coat on to leave.

“And yours?” I asked.

“I’m not taking the back off mine. It’s perfect.”

I frowned at him.

“But–”

“Burn it and start again, only do it better this time,”

I shook my head. I may make a hundred violins but I wanted to keep this as the earliest example of my work. It was the first thing I had made from scratch. I glued it back and showed my father with pride, forgetting that he had built our home without anything but modesty and a plan in his head. From then on I took notes on scraps of waxed paper in the workshop.

Learning without knowing it is happening is a curious sensation, taking what comes and making sense of it all later. You have all this to come.

Dear Baby, I’ve tried to put what I want to say to you into words many times over the decades but I always end up thinking of the past. It was these instances I remembered, not the knife and fork moments. I fear at this point, I am not being clear at all.

From then on it was as if I’d always made violins, had always known how to do these things. That was what I did. When

was there ever a time I did anything else? I was young then. Young, bright-eyed and eager. Thinking back on it, this is another of those instances when I find it hard to imagine I was the same soul.

Then, I was like you; a mere seedling; sprouting and emerging into the world. Now, I am a hulking oak tree, towering, leaning and clinging to the dry earth, rotting and trying to survive in the same old failing body that couldn't even use a saw if it wanted to, let alone create something capable of making beautiful music.

But this is all the distant past. What could possibly link those days of my youth to the present other than me? The cobweb branched out from that day and as the years fell away, it snared many men as it grew.

As the winter of 1982 fell, the cycle was almost complete. The winter evenings echoing the dark nights of my time with the luthier, the river running on, my savings running dry.

In my time, at full speed, I estimated I had made nearly 800 instruments. When I'd grown too old to make them, I had been witness to the fashion of extending the necks and spent decades doing this until the day came when I had only sold them. It was the comforting constant in my life all these years. But my tin box of money was nearly empty. The last item I had to sell was sat in front of me on the table, untouched and untampered with since the day I had completed it. A cycle; money runs out and things are sold, repeat. Nostalgia began to

seep into my thoughts but I knew that I had to sell it. I had no other choice, no money left and I had been holding back from letting this particular item go for more than a lifetime.

Hours later, I wheezed up the steps of the Midland Hotel and was waved through the door by a young boy. What could be more respectable then an old man with a violin case?

I sat at a table and was soon joined by a middle aged man in a beret who was clearly expecting to meet a younger man than me. His expression was of slight confusion and belief he was about to be tricked. After introductions, he cut straight to the point.

“And you say a relative of yours made this?” he asked, his Russian accent evident from the moment he spoke.

“Yes,” I lied, “It hasn’t really been played and compared to other similar pieces it’s-“

“But what else is there to compare it to?” he said in defence while looking round the other guests in the lounge. It was a picture of normality; businessmen sipping coffee and rustling their enormous pink newspapers. Whatever preconceptions he had, I would leave him to. The whole transaction had an unmistakable air of illegality to it from the start, which I couldn’t begin to explain. I had sent this collector a letter, he had replied anonymously arranging to meet me. He didn’t take it out of its case, but smiled and stroked it with his little finger where the varnish had cracked into hundreds of tiny square clusters. I too, was beginning to

feel like we were breaking the law and the exchange would be over quickly.

"This will not be played publicly," he said, an odd undertone of a question clung to his words.

"It could be if you wished. I mean, it isn't….missing," I tried to clarify, not wanting to say 'stolen' but also not wanting to say it wasn't. Why else would such a secretive exchange be happening? I just confused the situation more. The logic was that all the known violins of this era were just that; known. This violin was either a fake or stolen. He frowned and continued to gaze into the case. I glanced round the room while he made his decision.

"This is all very odd," he told me adding, "irregular," as he reached down into his briefcase.

A handshake later I left the hotel with the parcel of money tucked under my arm.

*

Keith Serrah celebrated his 28th Birthday in 1982. He remembered being out with friends on a pub-crawl and when the pubs closed he vaguely remembered a pool hall somewhere near Strangeways. His memory of the night was patchy from then on. He'd lied to everyone, saying this was a special birthday; thirty years, and he knew because of this, he'd been given £60 in grubby notes by his work friends. He didn't remember much about losing this money, but had concluded the mixture of a pool hall and inebriation had some connection to the missing cash. He also made a mental note to find another job so he could pretend to be thirty again next year.

The morning found him waking upright, leaning in a doorway somewhere in Chinatown. He walked to the war memorial to sit in the sun where he discovered an unopened can of Hofmeister lager in his jacket pocket so began to have a hair of the dog, liquid breakfast while surveying the sleepy morning city. Every day, there was a period of about seven hours where Manchester went into hibernation. When pubs closed, the streets were empty and plunged into darkness. The centre was a silent, eerie ghost town and remained so for the night, until the whirring of electric vehicles and the sound of sliding van doors opening and closing signalled the morning.

He watched the little milk floats scoot back and forth in front of him and boys leaping from vans to dump bundles of newspapers outside shops as he nursed his hangover. Then men in suits went into offices, out for cig breaks and then out for lunch. The events of other people told him he'd been sat there a few hours.

Two men came out of the Midland Hotel and the doorman hailed a taxi for the younger one, who shook the older man's hand and got in the cab with a violin case. The old man sighed and only managed to get a few steps beyond the hotel entrance when he had to stop to catch his breath.

Take a taxi, the old man told himself. Making his way across St Peter's Square he thought of the time it had taken to make the violin. Reminiscing wasn't usually something he entertained but it was inevitable at a moment like this. The distant past, present and unpleasant future suddenly collided as the old man stared across the road astonished.

When living in a city, years can go by without seeing a familiar face, let alone someone you are stalking. Yet, there sat on the white stone wall of the war memorial, sipping a can of beer, was Keith Serrah. Keith looked extremely dishevelled. One of

his shoes had no laces and his shirt collar was ripped. He smiled and looked up and down the road as if expecting a vehicle to pick him up. The old man, now torn from his daydreaming, started to cross the road. He was distracted by a sound and stopped in the middle of the traffic to see if there was something stuck to the sole of his shoe. There was nothing so he continued, concluding it was the weight of the parcel disrupting his balance. He shifted it to the other arm. The right foot still dragged.

As he crossed the road the leg began to grow heavier with each step. He spied a bench and headed for it to rest. The bench seemed so desirable at that moment that had he not been in the middle of the road, he would have stopped right in his tracks to dwell upon it, savour its form in anticipation of sitting. A BMW revved and the faces of the people passing seemed odd and distant, like a dream. A slow motion thought, in which the bench was the final resting place.

“You alright?” someone said to him. He was a stranger, why ask such a question? The shiny vertical metal strips that made up the bench were inviting him towards it. But the bench was wrong, it was upended, the metal strips were horizontal now. And the parcel pressed against his face with force.

The old man was weightless and couldn’t move. He shut his eyes for what he intended to be a moment. He looked and could see Keith walking towards him.

“Call an ambulance, a woman said. The old man looked into the blackness to try and see what the incident was, but saw only black. A car beeped its horn.

“Don’t try and move,” another voice said.

Another car beeped and the sound of a departing bus battled with another voice shouting, “Can’t you just fucking back up? You can’t get past.”

And the peacefulness of it all was welcome to him. It was like he had no part in the moment.

“Give him room,” a voice said.

A warm finger to his throat.

“He’s breathing. Can you hear me?”

The breeze.

“Move that parcel away,” Keith’s voice said.

Then sirens and lifting. Warm darkness and slamming of doors and movement, like instructions on sheet music. Second movement, first section, low bass pianissimo.

“Can you hear me sir? You’re in an ambulance,”

Muttering, -diac arrest, muffled sirens, men reading numbers and words of no interest, floating and groups of people. The bench grew further away at a rate of thirty miles an hour and the old man returned to thoughts of the workshop. Dirt floors and wooden workbenches. Aching sore hands with a dozen cuts and bruises on them. The satisfaction of working hard for fourteen solid summer hours a day and lying back in bed with a sigh. Years well spent. Lying back like now. Letting go and closing his eyes, resting. Not fighting the place his body wanted to take him.

“Male, approximately 90 years old, heart attack”

Throwing the scraps and shavings of wood into the fire and listening to the crackle. Smelling the scent of the warm resin as it burned. The oily yet minty fresh wisps of the workshop air. The callers at the door, the visitors keen on having an instrument made for them. Sweeping. Cleaning. Watching the world outside from behind the long rectangular weaver’s cottage windows. The roughly painted lime white walls and the luthier sleeping in front of the fire.

“Is this the man who had thirty grand on him?”

“Yeah.”

“He seems stable enough, no idea who he is yet?”

“No, he was carrying nothing but keys and cash.”

When he awoke he was sat up in bed with a drip in his arm. He opened his eyes to the hospital ward in front of him. Dreary grey walls and sleeping old grey people all around.

A nurse drifted by and he croaked a noise to get her attention.

“My package?”

Her cold face lit up with a smile, “You know love, that would be my first question too. You’re back to normal now, aren’t you?”

“Where is it?”

“Don’t you worry, it’s in the safe. Right little Mr Mystery you ain’t ya, do you fancy telling us your name now?”

The old man threw the bed clothes back, took the cannula out of his arm and pushed his legs out of the bed. He checked they still worked with a vexed expression on his face before shuffling away from the bed.

Through protests and against gentle urging he tried to make his way out of the ward, requesting his package and clothes. The knowledge that he could walk and talk and they still had his package was all he needed. There were raised voices between nurses, doctors and receptionists. Discharge, stroke, recovery, keeping someone against their will, evaluation, not advised, check-up, recommend. Amidst a whirlwind of clipboards and doctors arguing in hushed tones he left the building.

When he finally got home, he struggled to get the big iron key in the lock of the familiar door. Before he pushed the door open he fondly stroked the carved letters and numbers on the beam above it. Home, where time seemed to move slower than it did in the surrounding city.

The journey from the hospital had been a real effort, even if most of it had been by taxi. Inside, he stood motionless, hand on the wall, lungs heaving for oxygen. After a few minutes he moved into the centre of the room, placed the package on the floor and coaxed it, with a series of kicks, under the table. He stared at the furniture as if it would provide him with an explanation, before passing the workshop door and making his way to the bedroom. The workshop, once filled with instruments, was virtually empty. All that it contained now were stacks of newspapers and decades of dust, which could be measured in inches.

He lay on the bed and placed his hands palm down by his sides. He could faintly hear the noise of the river outside, coursing away and being swallowed up into the cavernous abyss beneath Victoria Station.

He sighed. The feeling was not entirely unfamiliar. It was a sense that something was about to happen. An impending shift to something he had no inkling of. When he was 102 years old, he'd had a similar experience. A dull throbbing in his skull had become a headache-like pain and over the course of three days his teeth had fallen out one by one. Then, lying in bed with a screwed up face and a bowl to spit blood into, he'd thought death was imminent. Instead of death came something else. On the fourth day his tongue glided over the stumps of new teeth. Then the feeling was gone. As sudden as an eclipse, he felt no pain and had new teeth.

Feeling better, he'd made his way to the library and was surprised to discover the event wasn't uncommon. It was a phenomenon all the same, but had been noted

on hundreds of occasions by doctors all around the world. An everyday regular phenomenon; the oxymoron of centenarians and their brand new molars. As the sun shone through the stained glass of the reading room windows onto his face, he began to feel completely ordinary again and smiled. Reaching a hundred years was no achievement. It was just something that happened to dull people, people who never lived a dangerous day in their lives. People who avoided conflict or stress, people who didn't do manual labour. People who just scraped by in life undetected, unloved and uninspired. Was this the only reward one got for living this long? It seemed a cruel joke. All the other faculties failed but you might be rewarded with new fangs. Teeth became boring again quickly.

Now the feeling was slightly different. No ache, no pain, just a hunger. A void in his belly, like he'd been eating bowlfuls of air for a year. He left the bedroom and began to collect things from cupboards and lay them out on the table. The bare wood hadn't witnessed such a spread in two hundred years.

He took a deep breath and began to eat. Tearing apart plump tomatoes, chomping lettuce, like it was apple. Five mugs of milk, each with an egg cracked into it, six glasses of water, peas, sweet basil and a whole bulb of garlic with walnuts, crushed roughly using the underside of his mug. Swallowing each mouthful like it was his last, a sensation surged through his body. An important wordless message. Obeying it, he went to lie down, struggling to the bedroom again. The fire had to be lit and he threw as many logs as could possibly fit into the hearth along with a few handfuls of coal and lay back on the bed, pulling a blanket over his body and closing his eyes.

He breathed deeply and slowly. Rising chest, falling chest, slower and slower, a train running out of steam. Space between the heartbeats getting longer. And longer.

In the house, fruit began to go bad, nuts dried up, flies laid eggs in the damp corners, maggots crawled, flies were born and died, junk mail piled up behind the door, salesmen knocked, Politicians canvassed, thieves tried the handle and dogs pissed on the wood. Sun shone through windows which became dirtier and dirtier, frost formed and melted on the dirt, plants shrivelled and withered, fireworks went off in the sky above, summer melted the tarmac outside, machinery drilled the road and thunder boomed. Laws were written, broken and changed; sons of Mayors became Mayors and then ex-Mayors. And when he woke up his mouth was dry and 1984 was quickly approaching.

He could see by the state of the house he'd been asleep a long time. The fireplace contained just cold grey ash. The view from the upstairs window revealed several new buildings and gaping holes where others had been. In the pile of post there were many letters sent by the council regarding planning permission, compulsory purchase, demolition and unpaid tax. He pondered how long he'd been asleep, kicking the mail to see post marks spanning many months.

Asleep wasn't the correct word. Coma, was that the correct word? Hibernation? Was that even possible in humans? Once, when he was younger he'd slept most of the winter. A severe winter with the house doors blocked by snow which imprisoned him, forced him to stay inside and drift in and out of sleep. This felt longer than a couple of months though.

“I feel amazing,” he said out loud, running his fingers over the soft skin of his cheeks. He thought about his life, the metallic taste in his mouth, his empty workshop and then began to wonder about Keith again.

Dear Baby, if your father had been a little more observant he would have remembered the thousands of times our paths had crossed. If he'd been a little less selfish and single minded, he'd recall having seen me in the street, in supermarket queues, on buses and trains. I knew your father so well, but to be old is to be invisible. It is one of the few benefits I hold. As an old man, I am instantly forgotten as I walk about. Erased from people's memories, removed from the picture I blend into, as merely an innocent and harmless old being. I had spent many years watching your father and on no occasion had I ever been looked at suspiciously as I hung around his workplaces, his neighbourhood, his schools. My wrinkled face is like a cloak to the world.

I am presumed to be a foolish grandparent, waiting harmlessly for someone or on my way somewhere and then dismissed. Nobody remembers an old man.

Keith never knew his own father, but again, I knew the man. Keith never knew his father because I killed him. There, I'll say it quite matter of fact, because that's what happened

and there's no way to say that it was accidental. There are plenty of people in the world who have done worse than I have so it does not weigh particularly heavily on my conscience. It was quick and relatively painless for him. Early on I had had hopes that the absence of a father might make Keith stronger, more independent and in tune with the stark reality of life. Instead, he succumbed to the fantasy of chance and gambling.

His name was James. Your grandfather James. James Serrah. He was similar in appearance to your father and his gambling streak was just as wide. If James had shaved his moustache he could have passed for Keith. Despite never knowing each other they nevertheless frequented the same sort of haunts. Casinos offered James a safe, warm place where time stopped and the outside world no longer existed.

He wasn't keen on drinking and would order a small beer just for appearances when he played cards. On the occasions he was given free drinks he would invariably play worse, so he stayed away from alcohol, but it was always on offer. The house gave free beverages to patrons and if it wasn't the house, it would be one of the money lenders, who loitered there, eager to get a potential customer drunker than they already were, make a rash bet and then be at hand to lend them a small amount at a large rate of interest. James wasn't the first or last person I saw fall into the hands of the devious men and women who frequented these places.

He would come to Manchester on the train just like your father. He would go to work in an office near the station, but on his way back would find himself getting delayed returning home. The city was a constant distraction of possibilities. In the early 1950s, there was, at the side of Victoria Station, a seedy Club called El Bossa Nova cocktail bar which also housed casino rooms. Now it's nothing more than a pile of rubble and fallen masonry, but in its day it was one of his favourite haunts. It was an ideal place for me to observe him, due to the rooms being smoky, crowded and noisy. I could sit two seats away and listen unhindered as he told the waitresses about himself and his plans in life. It was there I first heard that he was to be married. He twiddled his moustache nervously until the waitress came over to him and then lapsed into being a proud and confident man as he told her about his fiancé. It was also there, in a booth one night a few months later, that he sat opposite me fingering the corner of a small black and white photograph. I watched him closely as I pretended to listen to the band play a medley of popular jazz songs.

He was a pleasant enough man. Although he chatted to the waitresses in the club, he never, to my knowledge went any further, he seemed devoted to your grandmother.

The first time I heard of the news was when he showed the photograph of his wife to a waitress.

"I'm going to be a daddy," he said proudly.

“Well, you’d be better off going after that drink then, pet. You’ll be needing your money soon enough,” she said. He tried to give her a chip as a tip, but she refused. He smiled and started to talk of his luck. Like every gambler in the building, he believed *that* particular night would be different, *that* night it was his turn to rake in the winnings. Whether it was American, Spanish or English roulette, all of which were available to play at the establishment, he shared the same feeble mindedness as your father when it came to understanding chance in that he believed he alone had stumbled upon a pattern, a formula to predict the future path of the ball.

“They all think they know,” I heard him say to a young man sat next to him one night. He was right in a sense, but the ‘they’ he referred to included himself. They all jotted the numbers down, they all watched how each croupier threw the ball and some had stopwatches to record the length of time before it landed and presumably work out some supposed correlation to calculate the number on which it would land.

He had similar mannerisms to your father, despite the fact they never knew one another. I see them both sat there at the smoky table, side by side in my mind. They both had the same kind of nervous furrowed brow. It left a mark long after they had stopped gambling and wore their normal expressions. Normally, before gambling, James would loiter around the entrance pensively. He would then go inside, chat to whoever happened to be there, have a drink, lose all his money and get

the train home licking his wounds, frowning all the while. The similarities in the two men's actions do not need to be pointed out. Maybe these are not traits exclusive to your family but to all losers. Like father like son became a well-known phrase for good reason.

The Manchester of 1955, the year in which I killed him, was greatly different to the place you will grow up in. I for one, felt it was long overdue that the city had its obnoxious, upstart confidence beaten up a bit. In the previous decade it had been transformed into a cowering collection of buildings. Physically, it was a threadbare place, reminiscent of a tatty old patchwork quilt of red and white sandstone, brick and open spaces where rubble had been levelled flat. Attempts to rebuild and fill the gaps left the place like an old chess set, where missing pieces had been replaced by other random objects or simply not replaced at all.

Some of the fine buildings saw daylight for the first time in a century as the sun blazed through spaces and lit the scars of the Second World War.

Manchester seemed to me to have somehow survived accidently. It showed little signs of its enormous industrial past. Little indication of its capitalistic roots, which it spread across the globe. By day, it was a rusting, crumbling, stagnating, sighing place. By night it was a network of dead, ghostly quiet streets and as a place, it just plodded on until something eventful happened, whereupon its inhabitants would

recoil from the slap in the face, rally round and it would be reborn.

I'm not sure what James thought of it all, I don't recall having ever overheard him discuss the subject of the place he lived and worked, maybe he just accepted it as normal, for there was little else people could do about it.

My glimpses of James were usually confined to the casino and on his way to work and lunch hour. James would walk the streets as he fished his sandwiches from greaseproof wrapping and ate while he explored. I followed him on many an occasion, as he weaved across the vast open plots of land. Together we skirted the wounds of bombing, through what were once the ground floors of banks and offices. Surnames of companies spelled out in neat mosaic letters on the floor now greeted the sky, arches and doorways led to nowhere and scorched wooden signs remained attached to the walls of what were once warehouses.

He would throw the crusts or scraps of corned beef to the stray dogs and on more than one occasion, gave his sandwiches to the meth drinkers who slept in the sheltered corners of certain buildings. Sometimes he would sit on the banks of the filthy river and watch as a steady flow of debris and rubbish washed by. I wish I knew what he thought about on these daily excursions. He was nearly thirty years old. I'd hoped that with age, wisdom would come. I'd hoped he'd learn how to be responsible and that every time he lost his wages it would be

the last time and he would learn a lesson. He lived in his own little world most of the time though. It's possible he was thinking about becoming a father but I just don't know. Although he seemed happy when he talked about his wife, I'm not entirely sure he was. His wife was gaining weight as steadily as his debts were rising, but he continued to lose money and wander the streets each day as if he had no control over things, like all his choices flowed towards the same ending.

The city around him was changing faster than his life. For me, it was at times disorientating seeing views which had been opened up as walls were demolished, streets flattened and points of reference no longer there. I found myself suddenly lost in a familiar place.

The razing to the ground of whole roads and alleys was like a belated spring clean and reminded me of my own balding head. There were isolated clumps and tufts of buildings followed by plot after plot where huge structures had once been. I would read The Chronicle in the morning at a cafe opposite the offices where James worked. I would sip my glass of milk and read of the endless plans for the city. There were dozens of ideas put forth by the men with the clipboards to rebuild the entire city. Some of the plans suggested knocking everything down, starting afresh with straight parallel boulevards and uniform white stone buildings. They talked of having only trolley buses in the city centre, only trams, only pedestrians, mulled over filling in the canals, housing

everyone in high-rise apartments and covering the river so it ran on, but out of sight, silently existing under the city.

Most of these plans came to nothing though. In the end, the rash decision was made to leave most of the city alone but permanently erase a huge square section of the centre to make way for a new shopping complex. I doubt much thought was given to the benefits of these plans.

On one wintry afternoon as I finished my glass of milk and James descended the rickety staircase to leave the office, a meeting was occurring at the town hall. As he walked and picked the sandwich crusts away, a pencil line was be struck through several dozen streets one by one by the men in suits. The streets of your grandfather's meanderings; New Cannon Street, Sugar Lane, Pool Street, Falcon Street, Watling Street, Palace Street, Greenwood Street, Tipping Street, Friday Street, Peel Street, Milner Street. The streets where he would buy a packet of Woodbines, the streets he would frequent to borrow money or to repay money borrowed.

The weather was cold but the sun shone as the planners quietly ravaged the city, hungry to demolish and remove the past. The Manchester which James could have told you about was not made of wide pedestrianised streets but of labyrinths of soot-blackened Victorian buildings, each one curled around another to form scores of dead end alleys and courts. No doubt in the time it took James to eat his sandwiches, the council meeting had decided to demolish the buildings which surrounded

Seven Stars Court, White Hart Court, Piggott's Court, Swan Court, Marsden Court, Palace Square, Dickinson Court, Marsden Square and Spring Alley. In one day, more damage had been caused in the city centre than any bomb achieved. This was the city your grandfather lived and died in. And a river ran through it.

*

1954 had been a bad year, but this year would be different James told himself. He had a new plan.

The idea came to him when he observed how a certain brand of cheap ink had become smudged and blotted in the dampness of the season. Such a mind as his was always scheming, but it took extra concentration to concoct a bigger scheme. Often he would pretend to be writing. Sit with his left hand covering his eyes and an attentive ear for anybody approaching his desk. He wasn't writing though. He was merely leaving enormous trails of brown ink all over the paper in front of him while he tried to find routes to undiscovered get rich schemes.

This particular scam called for some serious pacing. He walked over to the window and pretended to look at the ugly view outside. He tried to ponder as the sound of the wrecking ball outside echoed through the office.

Ink blurred when the receipting book was left open overnight. He fished a cigarette out of a desk drawer and smoked while he continued to pretend to contemplate the rapidly decreasing skyline. He'd been told to throw the ink away, but he could switch bottles and use the cheap variety. He sucked the life out of the

cigarette and mulled the issue over some more as the reign of falling brickwork and masonry rattled through walls of the building.

The ink was poor quality, the office was damp. Providing the book was left open on the column total pages, he could write whatever number he wished and it would be ruined the next day. Blurred and faint on the moist page.

He raised his eyebrows searching for possible scenarios. It didn't even have to be him who wrote the figure. In fact, it would be better if he had nothing to do with it, he would continue on the next page with whatever total was presumed to be on the previous one. He could pocket the relevant amount before it went to the bank. It was rarely him who went to the bank anyway. The blame would fall on everyone in the office, not just him. All he needed to do was strategically ensure the bad ink was used, leave the window open and let the smog and northern wetness nature do the work.

He glanced at the book. There were one or two pages remaining. If he put his theory into practise next month, in a new book, it would be well into 1956 before anyone would even notice. By which time, he could have skimmed hundreds of pounds from the company. He could pay back all the money he owed and then have some on top of that. Suddenly, he realized there was barely anything left of his cigarette. He grabbed a pin from his desk and stabbed it in the cig so it could be smoked until it began to burn his lips. He dropped the dimp on the floor and crushed it with his heel.

Taking his sandwiches from his coat pocket, he announced that he was going on his lunch break early. He trotted down the wooden stairs, tapping the pale green wall tiles as he went. Outside the air tasted dusty. He coughed and spat onto the cobbles. He spent a few minutes on the bridge staring down into the brown waters as

they flowed by. The constant movement below was how he felt his life was at the moment; he was bobbing along amidst it all and somehow had to wade through the mud to get ashore.

His plan still required more thought. He would have to plant a few seeds in the heads of his colleagues. They all knew he gambled. He would have to pretend to quit, pretend to have an interest in something else. If the thefts were discovered, a gambler would always be suspected first.

And what a gambler he was. He couldn't talk his own conscience out of denying that fact. He recalled a card game a few weeks before. There was sixteen pounds on the table, he had an unbeatable hand and was seconds away from winning the pot, but a strange feeling began to emerge and something unsettling began to stir in him. The danger of losing had subsided and upon reaching the top of a precipice, he suddenly wanted to set off to climb another peak, with little thought to the danger or consequences. Had James been a mountaineer, his life would have been that of success and bravery.

"Raise the stakes a little?" he had said to the other player, breaking the tense silence in the room. The other man, who had almost resigned himself to the fact he was about to lose, flinched as though a shot had been fired. Both players faces were in darkness, the cards were visible in an angled shaft of light from the pool table lamps. Around them, pool balls clacked satisfyingly as if they were gliding round the table of their own free will.

"How can you ask such a stupid question at this point?" the man said, but leaned forward into the light and stared at James waiting for the revelation. James placed his cards face down and began.

“The thing is, I have the winning hand, there’s no doubting that, I’m not bluffing, I’ll show you if you want, but I still have to wait for the right moment to play it. You, on the other hand, have three almost useless cards and have to wait for three turns...” he thought in the fraction of a second pause, almost convincing himself otherwise. Was that correct? If they both had hands they couldn’t play didn’t that make them equal regardless of who had the highest ranking one?

He continued, “How about we swap hands outright, I give you my cards and you give me yours?”

The other man stared at his measly trio and shrugged, “but then you’d know what cards I have.”

“And you’d know mine too, but your hand would be the winning one.”

“What’s in it for you then?”

This was indeed a question that ruffled him at moments like this. He *was* going to win if he just waited for the right moment, why complicate matters swapping hands for no reason?

James tried to calculate things again; each of them would know which cards the other had and therefore would be in a worse position than they currently were. And sixteen pounds, it was more than two weeks wages, he would throw away the certainty of winning it all on a whim of adding some zest to the game.

“Nothing’s in it for me other than the pleasure of beating you,” he said, imagining the rush he would feel at that moment. A feeling that money literally could not buy. He wasn’t lying or scheming, he was being totally honest. He could win a boring card game or he could win an impossibly difficult one, a card game which he himself had made unnecessarily on purpose for no other reason than to create

tension. He knew which kind of win he'd prefer. Why take the easy route when the complicated way was far more exciting?

"Alright, yer on," the man said and slid the cards over, face down. James pushed his cards away from him, face up and then looked at the pathetic selection of tatty dog eared things he'd just acquired. The swell of the end of the game and unfeasible victory was to be momentous and leave him light headed and it was a breath away. People would talk about this game for weeks to come. How James, against all odds, won with the worst possible cards after giving away the best ones. It was stuff legends were made of.

Outside, a car door slammed, the next card landed on the deck and the man threw his cards down with a perplexed look on his face. James remained silent and still. The man reached over to the pile of money and began putting it in his jacket pocket. He left sixpence on the table, "there y'go, get y'sel sommat from t'chippy ont' way home," he said as he stood up to leave.

James sat in silence for another few seconds. Although he had just lost the chance of winning sixteen pounds he began to reason and rationalise. He'd not really lost that sum of money, he told himself. He'd lost the *chance* to win it. After all, it wasn't his sixteen pounds. He hadn't awoken up that morning with sixteen pounds and lost it. A chance isn't really worth anything in monetary terms, he told himself.

But now, as he wandered down Cannon Street in his lunch break, he thought back to that moment. In the daylight, on reflection, he wasn't really annoyed about the decision he'd made. He chalked it up as just one of those things. There were many of those things in his life, but that was to be one of the last ones. Luck had no tides, it coursed ahead relentlessly and you either had to stay afloat or drown.

After lunch, he went back to work, lobbing the screwed up piece of greaseproof sandwich paper over the leaning wall remnants of a bombed department store. Back at the dimly lit claustrophobia of the two rooms he worked in, the stacks of papers lay lifeless around him, taunting him that there were more exciting things elsewhere.

He continued to concoct and scheme without speaking to anyone. After half an hour of shuffling various piles around the desks he produced a tatty casino chip from his pocket and threw it to the young trainee clerk who momentarily stopped hammering away at his typewriter to glance at the object which had landed on his desk.

The clerk looked up, ciggie hanging from his bottom lip and said, “What’s this?”

“You know what it is, take it, spend it, I’m quitting.”

The boy shook his head, spilling ash on his jersey and grinned.

“And you need another fool to take your place I suppose?”

“No, it’s a gift, I don’t need it. Do you know how much that’s worth?”

“I don’t care, I don’t want it,” the boy said, throwing it back to him.

“Seriously, I’m going to be a father any day now, I can’t be throwing away money all the time,” James stated.

“Then go and cash it in.”

James screwed his face up. This was the second time someone had refused the chip. He was failing to give something worth more than a pound away for free. It was unbelievable; what was wrong with the world? He dramatically threw the chip into the empty waste paper bin, where it landed with a loud metallic clang and then continued writing in the book. He didn’t look up, although he wanted to. The office

was still silent. He knew that everyone was looking at him, waiting for him to reach down and retrieve the chip like it had all been a joke. He didn't.

A few seconds later he heard the scratch of a match as another cigarette was lit and then the typewriter hammering recommenced. Satisfied that he had cemented the moment in everyone's minds, he stared out of the window again and pondered how he was going to get the chip back without anyone seeing.

Outside, the milk bar opposite prepared to close and its one elderly customer paid and left, shuffling down the street. Newspaper sellers packed away their stalls, the fruit boys swept the flags and wheeled their half empty carts away. One by one the lights went off in the offices and one by one, the men in shirts and ties descended the stairs and shuffled wearily down the street. After a few minutes, all the lights were off, the whole building was in darkness and still James hadn't emerged.

Suddenly a light came back on in the office and seconds later went off. Then came the sounds of footsteps. In the smoggy moonlight James left the building flipping the casino chip between his fingers and smiling as he made his way down the street.

The next day was almost identical. There was little conversation during the morning, the only sounds to be heard were the shorthand girl's giggles and shoes squeaking down the lino corridor, the hammering and muted bells of the typewriters and the coughing and spluttering from the concoction of smog and office tobacco. Only the middle of the day differed. To celebrate the birth of James' son the night before, the lads from the office had all gone to a pub on New Brown Street, drank and played skittles in the basement, before returning to work two hours later.

The afternoon wore on and the building slowly descended into darkness as one by one, the offices locked up and workers went home. James, still slightly tipsy

from the three pints he'd reluctantly drunk that afternoon, went down the first set of stairs as normally as he could. He misjudged a step on the second set of stairs and almost lost his balance.

When he reached the ground floor, entrance in sight, he saw a figure in the doorway. He could see it was an old man and paid little attention. As he passed the man, he felt several piercing pains in his lower back and side. Pain unlike he'd ever felt, it was a fresh, clear and bright pain, like he'd fallen into ice cold water. It was instantaneous and it took his breath away. Literally, he found himself unable to breathe, unable to make a sound. His mouth made an O shape. He grabbed his side, paused for a moment and when he tried to walk, slipped in a large pool of his own blood which was flowing from the knife wounds and down his leg. He went down onto his knees and watched the pool of liquid trickling onto the steps below him, one by one. Colour dimmed as his vision fell into black and white and he began to lose consciousness. As his life poured out onto the steps below, he wondered, confused, why he was smiling.

The old man dropped a long knife on the steps, next to the bloody casino chip and muttered "all this ends the same way," before walking off leaving James to die.

James Serrah 1927-1955.

Dear Baby, you have come into this world and have immediately experienced change. Change from living in a warm, dark place and being suddenly brought into a bright, noisy, cold one.

Change has no form, age or agenda. It engulfs, sweeps and burrows itself into the fabric of life. It is the seed of uncontrollable difference. It convinces nations in the bat of an eyelid and is forgotten just as quickly as the previous year's sighs. It can go unnoticed, modify fashion, remove hats, words, species, languages, vegetables, towns and communities and cares not for what it has erased. It can be subtle and silent or as brutally abrupt as a bomb.

It is unwelcomed, but is a way of life. Without change we would be locked in a perpetual present. An ageless, dull ache of waking. Sometimes I felt this was how my life was and despite loathing change, I welcomed it at the same time.

Forgive me baby for meandering far from any point I may have begun to relate to you. The torrent of my consciousness has been unleashed and the need to tell is greater than any relevance to your own personal interests right now. I've been

silent for many many years and have a great deal of rage to get off my chest. Please bear with my side-tracking.

The change I saw my town take was painful. A town seldom wishes to become a city and it was a merciless beating. An unprovoked, no rules, brutal dog fight between the invisible change, and a stationary area, with a river running through it. The world's first industrial city had no predecessor to look upon for guidance.

People arrived, and the whole town became a pigsty. Then a wasps nest built within a pigsty. With workers building houses for more workmen to live in and endless labour and endless putrid products spreading outwards like ink blots on silk.

These people brought a new language, of frizzes, fustians, mingled stuffs, inkles, tapes and points and every year more foreigners came with a strange glint in their eyes, prepared to work harder, longer, for less money. Some were more articulate and smarter than the locals. They laughed at hand forged nails, water wheels, windmills, small crofts of land and the weavers lazy stockpiling.

The crofters were free of aspiration and worked only as much as they had to. What they grew they ate and they sold a little to buy beer and butter or flour. These town folk lazed around with no thoughts of religion or profit and the new people called them lazy and stupid. The rug was pulled from under them, their land was bought, their market-life ceased,

leaving a hundred families who wanted progress no more than they wanted a giraffe, had they known what a giraffe even was.

Each man in this mess somehow believed in the present and only the present, as if the past were something to turn one's nose up at in disgust and the future something of no importance. The poor man lived in this state, seeing only a meal ahead of him and the rich man believed by naming streets and squares and buildings in his honour, he would somehow be respected forever. So Lloyd, Hardman, Moseley, Watson, Jackson, Atkinson, Byrom all stamped their names in dirt, cobble, set, tarmacadam and concrete but did anyone remember who they were? Did Unger, Kenyon and Taylor even acknowledge those called who themselves Clarence, Francis, Catherine, Longworth, Tonman, Todd, Hunt or Turner as they added their names to the list of streets that were intended to remind us of someone we'd long since forgotten about.

The mood of hatred came and went and came again with politics and war. The German Jews who ran the shops near my home had their windows smashed and they moved or changed their names to be more English sounding. People hid or moved away. Schmitz became Smith, Müller became Miller. I hope you never have to experience this madness and hate, but mankind repeats their mistakes over and over, so I fear you may see this kind of hate at some point in your life. It may seem like a long time in the past to you, but 1927 is not that different to 1995 to me.

I remained, German only by birth, Mancunian in all other matters. I remained on my ever-changing street in my house frozen in time in this ever-changing place where streets popped up overnight and were replaced with different ones just as quickly. Roads throbbed and swelled as if in pain, dirt got dirtier and work got harder but the essence of the place was familiar so I always somehow felt at home, like a gypsy living in a wagon, on the move but with familiarity around.

The violins I made remained the same. Time had no impact on their shape or sound. The blocks of wood I bought came from foreign lands and had the same familiar appearance, as if time stood still in the place where they came from.

And it was amidst this sense of security I let things slide. I stopped checking up where Albert lived or what he was doing and in my work, I fell into a semi-retirement. I stopped making violins and rarely bothered to sell them; my box of money safe in a little hole under the floor boards, free from prying banks or thieves. Time runs away with itself if you let it, though. When I shook myself into action months later, I became angry at my lackadaisical attitude.

I sat in the pub and stared out of the filthy window. I looked at my pale hands lit up momentarily by the flickering ‘Bass on draught’ sign. I sipped my glass of water and continued to stare outside. All I could see was the wall opposite which was completely filled with colourful bill posts. In fact, even the doors and windows of the building had been

covered by the posters. I was bombarded by the things on offer in the advertisements. I didn't want soap or cough drops, Invalid Port, Oxo, suet or bicycles. What I needed was far more elusive and I'd lost it.

I'd lost him. I found it hard to believe. It had happened so suddenly it took me by surprise. Finding Albert Serah was certainly going to be more challenging than I'd previously thought. He'd been working in the pub for years but I'd lost track of where he lived, safe in the knowledge I could drop by at any moment to see how he was getting on. But with every word that came out of the landlord's mouth, my heart sank further.

"Nah, he just didn't come back, people come asking after him, like. Heavy types. Think he owed money. Took sommut from 'till too. Don't imagine he'll be in a hurry to have a pint here again."

Finding someone who doesn't know they are being hunted is easy. I glanced around at the drunks and pathetic wretches sat around in the pub, filthy clothes and shaking hands nursing the drinks they'd blown the last of their wages on. Why couldn't I be looking for one of these people? Drunks are dependable in their lack of imagination. Instead, I was resigned to the fact that I had to find a gambler, someone who clearly didn't want to be found or leave any tracks. I had to think back and gather the strands of it all together, remember scraps of information which I'd thought unimportant, in the hope they would lead me to him.

When I'd first discovered he was working in the Angel I almost became a regular there, weaving through the soot-black alleys behind Cannon Street until I found the slimy steps leading up to what appeared to be the back entrance of a pub. I sat on a comfy bar stool and watched from close proximity and saw his lack of progression in life. I'd thought it was the perfect set up. A public place from within which I could sit and listen to him and all the while he would be unaware I was following him.

My initial reservations about how to sit around for hours in a pub when I neither drank beer nor ate the kind of food they sold were soon extinguished. Upon entering the pub the first evening I asked the barman if he would sell me a glass of water for the same price as a beer. He shrugged nonchalantly and said "Aye," like it was a perfectly normal request.

"Then we'll get along fine," I told him, paying for the water and sitting down at the bar. I don't know what he imagined of me, if anything, but my visits were regular and I sat at the bar, playing around with my business matters on scraps of paper as he sold me glasses of overpriced murky tap water.

Albert Serah was the first of your relations to be called Serah. I was never entirely sure if it had happened because a boy with a girl's name was viewed as embarrassing or because someone somewhere along the line misspelled or misread one letter making Mr and Mrs Sarah's son bear the name Serah.

I can say with some confidence that I didn't kill Albert, although I was slightly involved in the circumstances leading to his death. He was a slippery fellow and I feel that with or without my involvement he would soon have found himself climbing into in an early grave anyway.

1927 was a difficult year for me. The legalities of trying to avoid detection were catching up. Most of the previous year I'd spent transferring my property to and from my ownership, and shifting investments around in an effort to leave a complicated snail trail of numbers, which not even I could follow. The man I had hired to tend to my finances was as bent as a ram's horn. He never once asked why I kept moving my savings from one bank to another, to close accounts, switch banks and amend my name on documents. As long as he received payment, he was happy. Fortunately, I was in the best location to find such a crook. The Manchester I know is one where everybody and everything has a price.

"My grandfather once did some work for you I see," he told me one day as he went through my stack of papers. I nodded, trying to remember the man.

It only got worse as the decades forged ahead. Censuses, taxes and records all meant it become more difficult for me to avoid stating my age. There was only so long I could play the part of the old fool who couldn't locate his birth certificate, house deeds or who wanted to close his account again. There was going to come a time where I couldn't find an accountant who

played violin and who could be ushered to my stock cupboards in exchange for silence.

But after years of careful forward planning I was back to square one. A dead end. Scratching around in my mind to recall where I could start my search for Albert. The landlord clearly knew nothing. I gazed intently at the eerie glow of the gas lamp behind the bar and then put my coat on to leave.

*

The old man made his way down Withy Grove towards the Church, wiped his filthy boots on the mat outside the building and entered. Inside, the cold fragrant air took his breath away and he buttoned up his coat for protection. He gestured to the Dean who was making his way towards a side door. In a stage whisper he said, “Excuse me,” and was greeted with a smile.

“How good to see you. I must admit I haven’t had much time to practise of late, so your fine instrument has been a little neglected,” the Dean told him.

“It is your instrument now,” he corrected.

“But it was made by your hands and will remain your instrument just as we are all God’s children.”

“Perhaps,” the old man said, referring less to the violin than the Dean would have imagined.

“What is it that brings you here then?”

He rubbed his chin, unsure of how to broach the subject.

“Well, I’m looking for one of your flock, so to speak. I know his wife is a God fearing lady, as for him, I-”

“You are also looking for Albert?” he said without hesitation.

“Also?”

“I fear he has got himself into a little trouble. I wasn’t aware you were close to the Serah family.”

The old man glanced upwards to the wooden panelling to disguise his shock, “Family?”

“Yes, his wife is now a mother. She is worried sick about him, do you know where he is? There have been several unsavoury gentlemen looking for him recently.”

“Well, I understand he may owe some money to certain parties,” the old man muttered vaguely around the subject.

“I gathered this was the case. Why are you looking for him, does he owe money to you also?”

The old man shook his head, “No, it’s just that in the past our families were close, I was concerned that’s all. I wished to help him out, if I could, especially with a little-”

“Boy,” said the Dean, “James I believed they called him,” he added as if it would help the matter.

The Dean looked furtively around to ensure they were the only two people in the building and whispered, “His wife tells me he is owed some money by a man who works at the tannery near Hunt’s Bank. He may go there. This is all I know,” he said, before rushing off with a guilty look.

The old man stood in the holy building alone, with only thoughts of murder in his mind.

*

A bell rang, a whistle blew and men began spilling out of the abattoir, the sweet smell of death and decay coming with them. On the opposite side of the cobbled street came the tannery workers who were carrying their own acrid scent.

The sound of clogs on cobbles grew louder than their voices, like a crescendo of wooden thunder. Albert quickly singled out the person he was looking for, easily the tallest man in sight and emerged from the alley, joining the throngs of people. He wormed his way towards the man, between the sea of flannel, leather aprons and cigarette smoke. When their eyes met, Albert's lit up and the man sighed.

"Where is it?" Albert demanded.

Stan laughed, "You can have it, I don't want people coming after me for your money," he said, reaching into his jacket and pulling out a single crumpled bank note. He passed it to Albert, smiled and added, "Only another fifty of these to go and you're out of the shit eh?"

As the note was snatched out of his hand, Stan laughed, for the sole reason that he wasn't in as much trouble as Albert. Holding the money, Albert stood still and the crowd poured around him until he was alone in the middle of an empty street.

Walking away, it took him a few minutes to realize someone was following him. The money in his hand had created a momentary diversion to the danger he was in. He turned and stared at the old man, suddenly filled with paranoia. As he weaved in

an out of alleys he concluded he wasn't being followed; this was just an old man heading in the same direction.

Barges of coal and tarpaulin chugged past like shoals of industrial fish. The two men stepped through the debris on the tow path; piles of rotting meat, sacks of rubbish, manure, wooden crates and cats digging for food, slowing their travels down. Some of the animals scattered at Albert's presence. The further they walked, the darker it got. The moon's poor reflection on the dark water was soon the only illumination to be had. The path got narrower until time itself caught up with them. They now stood on a newer part of the waterway. A part which dated not from the era of animals pulling the barges, but from the time of engines. A time that needed no towpath. This was a dead end.

*

Dear Baby, after the initial panic, I felt satisfied I was closing in on Albert and caught up with him by the canal later that day. He'd walked himself into a place from which there was no escape. I was surprised he'd led me there. I felt the cold metal of the gun inside my pocket and despite the darkness, I believe he clearly knew what was about to happen.

"I just need more time," he pleaded, holding his hands up in the air and adding, "I have some money now."

I could see the fear in his eyes. A fear not of me but of someone else he owed money to. This eased any guilt I had at that moment. I shuffled further toward him.

We both knew there were options at that moment. I live, he dies. He fights, he gets the gun, he gets shot, I get shot. As I went through the possibilities in my mind he threw himself into the canal with a gloomy gloop, his shape vanishing into the filthy waters as if instructed by my weapon. The oily scum parted and gave a treacly ripple as I pointed the gun at the likely place for him to surface on the other side. Thirty seconds passed. A minute passed. I thought back a moment; had I seen him take a deep breath before jumping? I thought not. I looked further down the canal towpath, judging how far the water level was from the bank. Two feet? It would be difficult for a fully clothed, cold, wet man to haul himself out of. I lowered my weapon and looked again at the water.

How long had he been under now? Two minutes? Had he got tangled on something underwater? Could he even swim? I thought back to all the times I'd seen him and whether I'd ever seen him swimming or heard him mention he could. Yet he'd taken the odds of jumping into the water. What kind of fool takes those kinds of odds just to avoid paying a debt? The black unknown. Evidently your grandfather thought the odds were favourable. The fool. A fool who never surfaced.

Dear baby, I hope you can make a note of these choices and learn from them. I hadn't killed Albert as such. His own stupid choices had.

Over the next few weeks I scoured the newspapers looking for any mention of his body being found but there was nothing.

Dead bodies in canal were far less important than the National Strike or stock market, so like my own father's death it remained unknown. A decomposed, unnamed, entry into the earth.

The earth is like home. It is the place we all come from and the place we all end up. From all inedible dirt comes life. Life itself is something that nobody understands. I've thought about it a lot over the years, from flitting fragments to vexed head scratching moments. It seems to me that we either think about life or we don't. We keep our heads down and struggle through life without a moment to spare, never wondering about it, or, like me, with an open calendar to ponder its elusiveness.

It moves by silently and even if we happen to spot it from the corner of our eye, what influence do we have on its plans for us? Some people talk of the Grim Reaper or Abaddon but whatever name it is given, the ending of life enthrals and intrigues us much more than a hundred births for we all know how the birth came about and when it will happen. We have a prelude to birth, an overture if you like. Death comes in the middle of a movement; the middle of a bar just as you think the refrain will change.

I've had a lot of time to think about this. Things you may consider trivial or irrelevant. The irrelevant only becomes relevant when someone takes the time to connect the dots, draw conclusions and explain why it is relevant.

Many years ago, I sat in a dank debating hall with a dozen other bearded men listening to a lecture about centenarians given by the Manchester Literary and Philosophical society. It was a damp and dismal evening and some of the men seemed to be there only because it was slightly warmer than outside. The speaker talked about people throughout history who claimed to have been over a hundred years old. He spoke quietly and when he paused, the soft roar of the gas lights seemed as loud as his voice. As he muttered through the speech, eyeing the waxy paper in front of him, his words seemed to be delivered from a wry smile. He sneered at descriptions of people who believed they were over a hundred and monotonously dismissed those who claimed to have lived over two hundred years old. The titters and chuckles from the audience made me wonder why these pompous men had come to hear about something they clearly did not believe in. After all, an atheist does not attend church so he can challenge the sermon or laugh at the words spoken. Other than myself, there was only one other person unamused by the topic. After twenty minutes, he stood up and without warning, addressed the speaker mid-sentence.

“Are you not a God fearing man?”

“I am indeed and proud of it,” came the reply.

“Then when you mock these people you speak about, you must be forgetting Genesis 24:10 which states Terah to be 240 years old.”

“Ah, but Psalm 90 Verse 10 also says the days of our years are threescore and ten and if by reason of strength they are-”

The speaker had no time to finish his quotation before another one was hurled back at him, “It is not only the bible that makes claims; Sirach 18:8; The number of the days of men at the most are a hundred years.”

“Sir, then you are destroying your own argument with these words.”

Gas lights filled the silence for a few seconds before the retort was delivered, “Genesis 25:29-34, Isaac lived to 188 and-”

The speaker raised his voice and boomed, “As recorded by a primitive calendar which did not contain the same number of days in a year as our own.” The speaker stabbed the air with his finger on each word, “The bible is not incorrect; these people lived years which were much shorter than we know to be correct.”

The heckler sat down defeated.

That evening, everyone shuffled out of the relative warmth of the building and I suspect, never considered the matter again. The subject interested me for personal reasons though, and later that week, I went to the library and leafed through several books on the subject of centenarians. The library, regardless of which building it happened to be housed in, always felt familiar and comforting. It was quiet and always smelled of tantalizingly close, leather bound musty past. No

matter what decade I visited it, the same books were there, waiting for me. Looking only slightly older.

What I read there pleased me. Towns and villages all over the world told the same story and boasted their own smattering of people who claimed to have lived over a hundred years. Throughout history there was no shortage of claims and few, if any were treated with anything other than doubt.

With no glory or prize in return for such claims, I began to wonder why people who claimed to be great ages were all doubted or tarred as liars. The birth and death records told a different story than what was commonly believed, so why did people not believe that man could survive to be over a hundred years old?

Was it simply because they had not seen firsthand evidence to verify such facts? I had not seen first-hand evidence of the annual number of horses sold in Europe but couldn't dispute a figure put before me, for this reason. And if a hundred years of life were possible, why then draw the line at another fifty years or another ninety?

Closing the book and placing it on the pile of others in front of me, that day, I sat in the tranquility of the library aged a hundred and forty three and smiled to myself. Surely I only believed it were possible because I had no way of disbelieving. I was living proof. Believe or disbelieve the reams of documentation; credit or discredit the accuracy of the Bible, Torah or the possible error in the record keeping, the

only way to really believe in such a thing was to live this long. Only those who achieved a great age believed. We were the minority. Once accepted as fact, you may then begin to wonder why it had happened. A divine reason to be on the planet or sheer accident?

I have had a lot of time at my disposal over the years. When I was younger I managed to amass a stockpile of finished and semi-finished violins as if I were hoarding very expensive firewood. The long dark winters made it impossible to work, so I had nothing else to do but wonder about such things. But what does a person wonder about? The world around them? Philosophising over the merest detail had long been the done thing when I worked. How would the sound be affected if I shave a sliver off here? What will happen to the tone of the instrument if I add more ribs to the body? The thoughts billowed away from my work and drifted to myself and my own body.

I have already mentioned my particular dietary preferences. From the first moments of my life, I shunned what most would call normal food and having reached an age where I could consider my own tastes, I clearly saw that I disliked cooked food. Not only did my taste buds recoil in revulsion at the sticky broths and dripping meat that my parents ate, but on some level I also despised the elaborate processes which perfect things such as onions, milk or mushrooms had to endure in order to be deemed fit to put in one’s mouth. The pounds of

animal fat, flour or butter, which was mixed with these succulent beauties in order to be transformed into a pie or a stew, in my opinion, was insanity itself.

Here were these perfect objects, plump and peeking from the ground or falling from the tree, fresh and at their finest; yet all around me I saw people mashing, frying and destroying their beauty. These little parcels of goodness were exquisitely formed and special in their own way and yet adults peeled or boiled and ruined them, scalding and charring their goodness. It is something that I didn't understand. Alone by candle light I would pace around my home, unable to sleep, trying to discover explanations to these unanswerable puzzles.

I started at the beginning trying to fathom the mystery. Most folk admitted that apples and pears were at their best fresh and uncooked, but from here on, disagreements appeared. It's a line that we draw in our own heads without realizing. Are gooseberries better raw or cooked? Are plums, cherries, mulberry and bilberry only to be eaten boiled or baked in a pie or when mixed with sugar and pectin and placed in a jar? Did man not live happily for thousands of years before discovering fire? Was I alone in thinking that food was at its tastiest when devoured fresh and raw?

I am not what anyone would describe as a religious man, as you will have no doubt gathered by now, but this is how nature made these things and this is how they should be. I cannot preach this way of life to others though, I did not consciously

choose it. For me it came naturally; mushrooms and kale cannot taste any better than when freshly picked and I could not be persuaded to put my freshly cracked eggs into a pan and turn their enriching liquidity into a sickly white burnt mass for any sum of money. The idea to me seems as ludicrous as eating sand.

When I was younger, it seemed easy too. The bushes around the farm gave me endless seasonally changing bounties and I felt most content when scouring the hedgerows for skirret root, colewort and wild garlic. I lay in the shade of a hedgerow hollow and opened my canvas bag. I brushed the soil of the horseradish root and sliced a piece off with my knife. I foraged through the seasons, which each had their own particular treasure. There was a never-ending list of things I could eat and drink on my doorstep, and if I couldn't wait to locate them, I had one of the finest markets in the county a stone's throw away.

The vegetarian is only a recent creation, but I am not one of those, I have eaten meat of sorts. When I first saw my father washing and boiling tripe I asked to try a piece before he cooked it. Green tripe as it was called it back then. It was not actually green, more of a cloudy grey. It smelled of decaying grass and my father screwed his face up as I chewed the cold soft piece of flesh. I ate it a number of times when I was young. I have also, on occasion eaten fish; the salmon and eel caught in the river. In my youth, I only had to walk to the

edge of the farm boundary, through the squelching boggy grass to the water's edge to bait the wicker baskets, which lured in the eel. Even though their flesh was tough, it was a wholesome and fresh meal. I read with much interest that there were faraway places in the world where everyone ate raw fish without being regarded as peculiar.

These times did not last long before the black came. It came suddenly; the crystal waters were one day coloured with inky darkness. The waters were not given a chance to breathe or recover. With every new tannery or factory came a new fluid pumped out as waste. The chemicals mingled and loitered, congregated and smothered anything that was stupid enough to have stayed. The silt raised the water level and animals lapping it became stuck and would drown, starve or simply get sick from drinking the vile fluid. They would drink the lead marked waters and become slower, shake then never wake up.

A few persistent tiny fish tried to endure the gloomy flow but they too soon followed the path of the white clawed crayfish, which turned black and never returned. The salmon never retraced its steps home. The last one I saw literally slipped from my hands and was gone forever. Its cold eyes appeared to be considering the options; be killed by me or struggle back into the toxic water to die a slower death. It chose the latter.

Like an invisible piper passing though the waters, the insects all scuttled off, the birds that ate the insects flew

away in search of cleaner places, something that the river was sadly denied a chance of doing itself. As much as it churned and thrust against the greasy banks fighting, its waters never diluted the murk, it appeared broken and beaten.

Sometimes I felt like that too. I related to this constantly changing body of water. If it hadn't given up on living, then neither had I. I look at us both now and see it still has some fight left in it. The previous dozen decades of abuse still fresh in its mind as the heron return to the city and fish grace its waters again. They left a village and came back to a city.

I ponder it all calmly but it whirs round in my head like an angry hornet as I try and make sense of it. We live in a chaotic and unorganized world but we all seem to have the need to make some kind of conclusion. By now, I'd seen so much that confused me that I was unsure what sense was.

I tried to think back to a time in my life when things were not turbulent but struggled to do so. Those times were a small fragment of memory, like a chunk of ice, melting as time went on. Father and mother, summer on the farm, the quiet little place we lived. It was a brief chink of light in a polluted sky.

Things were perpetually and chaotically moving on around me. While the town glowed and smoked triumphantly, showing off its ingenious machines, my trade remained stuck in time. The

little wooden instruments I sold were fixed in the 18th century, much like myself, while the world marched ahead.

The insomnia persisted for many months and I paced around the house like a madman, feeling that the strands were all there dangling, waiting for me to plait them together. Realization came gradually. The strange little foible I had, but was unable to articulate about food, my parents deciding it did me no harm and letting me have my own way, the fact that I began to outlive my elders, the fact I began to outlive my youngers. As the years went by I was not aware of the connection and it took me around seventy years to piece the puzzle together. What was it, which separated me from the people around me who were all dead at the age of forty or fifty? It was true that I didn't work in a factory for sixteen hours a day or down a mine, inhaling filth into my lungs, but I was still outliving the wealthiest and healthiest people in the town.

As I turned eighty, there were only a handful of people around who had achieved this inconceivable age. The night of the lecture seemed to seal the topic. Nobody would believe me so why try and make them? My sleepless night-time pacing lessened. However, other memories sloshed around in my head. I had watched a man become a father and killed him. I had watched his son become a father and then killed him. On the other hand, I had lived a quiet life. I had brought great pleasure to the hundreds of people who bought my instruments.

Yet, decades had gone by and time had mislaid me. Murder, food and violins had spurred me on, but in the grand scheme of things, I had been overlooked. Myself and how many others? There were some things left unquestioned I concluded.

I began to sleep peacefully again.

II

The little boy comes to your workshop with the final payment for the instrument and a message about where it needs to be delivered. You assume he has made a mistake at first. You aren't going to deliver it. He tells you his mother doesn't trust him with taking it back on his own so you must bring it to her. This is the kind of arrangement you hate; one you haven't been consulted about. You rarely go out in the day; the day is for working or resting. You never go out in the baking summer heat. But now you have to do both of these things because one of your customers has decided so.

The scant information the boy gives you is that his mother works on the stall that sells the pans. You ask the boy 'what pans?' but he just shrugs.

"Which market then?"

Again the boy is unsure. "The little one?"

You are annoyed now and the boy is trotting away. You reach for your keys and shout for him to wait, but he has gone. Wanting the whole transaction over as quickly as possible, you place the violin in its case and leave the house to find the elusive stall.

Trying to progress down Chapel Street is like battling upstream. You push your way through the market day crowds and yank the black case free from the baskets and bags it is constantly getting caught on.

The flat-iron market is your first guess as to where the pan stall might be. The guess is wrong. You weave in and out of the bobbing heads, glancing at the items on the floor; bundles of second hand clothes, clothes of the dead, still reeking of their previous owners, battered leather boots, clogs and ancient stockings all being offered by Irish rag sellers who sit unpicking material so it can be re-knitted.

The objects laid out on the floor continue: towers of greasy caps, dog- eared volumes of theology, mechanical literature and bibles. You are amazed that people are crowding to see this tat, let alone buy it. You glance between the stalls of bonnets and caps, material held up by old hags, material lying in heaps alongside grubby cuffs and collars, but still can't see any sign of the child or the woman. Drunks loiter around the market. Some try and sell you handfuls of nails or dirty hammers, bags of candles, glue and assorted pocketable things they have stolen. One child, who obviously cannot read, is waving pieces of stiff printed card to passers-by in an attempt to flog a stack of Ballantine Coffee Merchant's 1882 calendars, oblivious to the fact they are a year out of date.

The day is getting hotter and with every step, you become more and more thirsty. As you turn and join the stream of people heading to the next market, you shake your head in annoyance. This is not going to be a simple task.

The crowd of people thins a little, but there's no protection from the sun which is beating down even harder on your thin cap. You arrive at the apple market and realize you are going to have to walk through it all just to get to the next market.

It is wrong to refer to them as individual markets, you think. In the past, when there were a few hundred people in Manchester, they were indeed single markets dotted around the centre. Now, tens of thousands of people are living here, the

markets have gathered together to form one colossal monster market. A vast beastly swarm of markets.

The warm smell of fruit and vegetables is pleasant only for a few seconds. The mingling earthy scents of fresh beetroot and potatoes combine with the sickly sweet aroma of apricots, rhubarb and whinberry, making you feel nauseous.

Now you are just one of the blur of faces, hats and shawls making your way slowly through crates of pears, carrots and plums. An outstretched hand tries to tempt you with a bundle of raspberries wrapped in a cabbage leaf. Underfoot there is the squelch of stray overripe whortleberry and you begin to curse the child and his message, the woman and her stupid arrangement. You don't care how much she has paid for the violin, you don't care that she's been paying a penny a week for years. It isn't worth this.

The sickliness you feel is only made worse as the next phase of the market begins. Ducks, fowl, pigeons and geese in all stages of presentation appear before you; live, healthy and clean; live and dirty from having walked miles with their owner to meet their death. Sickly near-dead specimens, dead and feathered, dead and plucked, plucked and dying and finally rotting, sticky and completely inedible. All are being bought.

It's a waking nightmare. The confusion, the noise, the heat. The names of the sellers begin to blur with the names of the alleys and streets you pass through. Denion shouts and Lockwood of Mason Street hawks, Bealey and Winder of Cannon Street sell sell sell. You push, shoulder to shoulder, through the crowd to Smithfield's. Every alley is as packed as the main thoroughfare. Brandrett, Franklin, Morten. Grimacing at every corner. Tetlow, Lingard, Falcon. Shaking your head at every offer. No you don't want a suckling pig or a rabbit.

The air is thick with clouds of smoke, the smell of coal, alcohol on the breaths of the marketers, perfume scents and toilet sprays being tested by eager girls with high pitched giggles. Frangipani, violet and lilac spritzing in an eye watering cloud.

A seller throws a handful of nuts for people to sample, many of them land on the floor and are crushed by boots and clogs. Your mouth is dry and you come to the closest thing to standing still as the crowd will allow you.

Fish are all around. Fish once taken from the nearby rivers and lakes; chub, gudgeon. Flounders. Now they are brought to Manchester by train each day. Red herring to be eaten on the spot, dried or salted herring, four penny for a pound, cod, cockles by the barrel, cold ghostly pyramids of sole. Fetid fish lying next to fresh salmon.

"N'oist?" a woman asks, passing you an oyster. You shake your head.

"G'won," she insists, cracking it open and placing it in your hand. She isn't trying to sell it to you. She is pitying you and the state you are in. An old man overcome by heat. You look at the glistening thing and slurp it down in a gulp. The woman pats you on your back, takes the shell and throws it in a barrel as the crowd commands you to move again.

The salty juice has only aggravated your thirst. Your tongue is as dry as a cat's. The throngs of people become more concentrated again and you recognize that you are closer to Smithfield.

The wares change from animal to plant; chibols, cabbage, peas and unidentifiable green salad tied in string bundles. Waldmeister, yarrow stalks, nettles and dozens of medicinal herb stalls. Roots for dieting, powders for hair growth and penny-a-bottle cures for anything, all of which will cure nothing. Salves and balsams,

“Pain i’th’back or i’th soide, dandyloins’ll kewor you!” screams a grey haired Irish woman over the hubbub.

Right then, you notice some table legs on a stall. The pinkish swirling of the wood looks like Mahogany. You move closer to verify this. They are easily thick enough to make into violin necks. The seller is using them as weights to hold his rags down.

He sees you looking and passes you one. Everything here is for sale.

“How much?”

“Ten.”

“Four.”

“Eight.”

“Five.”

You give him the coins and he ties them up with string. Now both your hands are filled with cumbersome items. It’s impossible not to buy things when they are so ludicrously cheap, you tell yourself.

You decide to stop searching for the woman. You need a drink. If she wants the violin she can come and get it herself. You need a glass of water. The abundance of produce is making you feel more sick with every step. Everywhere you look there is too much of everything; roots, bulbs, seeds, bags of horse hair, human hair, ribbons, table cloths, silk, Birmingham brooches, tiaras, cameos. The excess of everything when all you want is a simple glass of water. The noise around you is so distracting you don’t even have the time to think the word ‘water’ once without being interrupted.

“Awonnut gie nobbut three,” the haggler next to you says.

“Y’bort it afore for more aw reckon.”

It is literally impossible to walk without being offered something, none of it water. The smell of decay mixes with cooking and burning wood. It is never ending. Birds again, and game, you step over the crimson streams of blood oozing from a barrel of mystery discard. A river of liquid running through a market of chaos; the town in miniature. Blood stained boards, blood stained marble slabs, blood stained aprons of the boys with the cleavers.

Cider a penny a glass, beef sandwiches a penny each, clay pipes, threp'ny suppers eaten as wooden footfalls pound on stone flags. Still thinking of water you suddenly realize you are inside the glass and girder building. The space is bursting and stifling, the roof bounces the voices and shouts of the hawkers back to the ground and your ears are battered with Greek phrases, Italian exclamations and Lancashire accents.

Clemmed naked Irish infants beg you to buy the objects they have found; incomplete old newspapers, rags, discarded fruit and runaway turnips.

The heat and concentration of bodies is the last thing you need. Why is nobody selling water? This, you know the answer to. The number of wells in the city has decreased but the population has increased. Some wells have dried up (the river Tib has all but vanished, mysteriously), some have been bought by wealthy families and others have been declared unfit and filled in after a spate of deaths and illnesses from contaminated water; weals and buboes, vomiting and slow poisoning.

Months ago, you began collecting rainwater, but even this was filthy from the soot and acidic smoke, which came from the factory chimneys. You began to research how filtering worked and constructed a multilevel purifier so the rain passed through a tray of gravel, then charcoal, sand and gauze until a nearly clear liquid dropped from the tin funnel into a bottle. After being boiled, it's the closest thing to

fresh water in fifty miles. Water; the most precious commodity, yet at the end of your garden a river runs which can no longer supply anything that is not toxic.

As you manoeuvre through the mass of heads you marvel at how different this place is from the city you take your early morning walks through. Normally you leave home as the sun is coming up and view a different city altogether. A quiet set of streets, free from the pounding of clogs, without the noise and black smoke spewing from the factories, without the chunnering of the engines. Usually, your hours in the workshop, taking advantage of the sunlight, are the best hours to avoid the city outside.

You mutter to yourself, unheard in the noise of the market, mutter a statement. This point, right now that you walk through, is the dividing line between the little town you remember and a city which has lost control of itself. You are sure that never again will streams babble or children play in the streets without fear of being run down by ten ton lurries or fifty seater omnibuses so heavy they can only slow down, not stop, for people to alight for fear of killing the horses. Never again will the relative silence be free of the sixty thousand bobbins, reels and spindles clattering their deafening racket. This moment of change is right now, not with the discovery of steam power or the railways, but right now, you are standing in it. The dividing line between the old and the new.

You assure yourself that you will never again leave home at this time of the day, no matter how much you are paid. Money cannot buy a glass of water. Of all the dining rooms, refreshments stalls and refectories around, none of them can produce even a drop of it. How can something so basic and simple be so impossible to obtain? Hissing tea urns. Ale ha'penny a glass. Enormous fa… *You see the woman and the pan stall*.

She thanks you. She can see you are flustered and offers you a beer. You attempt a smile and shake your head, looking for the quickest way to exit. You don't have the energy to get into a discussion on your dietary choices now.

"Tea perhaps?"

"I don't want a tea or a beer, I just want a glass of water," you snap back at her. Is that asking too much? Elsewhere lakes of it lie idle, mere's are filled as it falls from the skies or sits frozen in bergs.

"Sit down," she tells you, passes you a mug of beer and begins to admire her violin. You shake your head again. You have never felt so isolated. The whole of Manchester is drinking weak mead; from children in the mills to old men. What has become of the world?

"Milk?" says a voice. You turn to see and there he is. The image of his father. There he is; William Sarah.

"Fresh Milk, fresh as my new born bairn," he declares.

Murder aside, you admit defeat and with low expectations say, "Milk then." It will probably be days old and curdling but at least it will be cleaner than water or ale.

After paying William, you notice the white liquid in the cup seems to have a pinkish tinge. You take a brief gulp of it and spit it out.

"What in the name of all humanity have you put in this?"

"Helps it keep longer."

"What does?"

"It's not harmful, it's healthy."

"What, other than milk, is in this?" you ask angrily.

"I can't pronounce it, it's a chemical," William tells you, his eyes looking to the heavens for the answer and then adds, "Ere, bet ya tuppence you can't guess."

You sigh wearily. A monetary bet in less than a minute; he never fails to amaze you.

“You want me to bet on a word which I don’t know and you can’t remember?”

“I’d ‘member if y’said it.”

“Why would you want to remember it, if it means you lose tuppence?”

Before you know it WIlliam has you in the midst of a ridiculous discussion.

You shake your head, there is nothing that should be added to milk. Milk was meant to be fresh and untampered with. The Manchester Guardian has recently been filled with stories about yellow dye being added to animal fat and mixed with butter or twigs being ground down and mixed with coffee to bulk it up, but milk, what could be added to milk? You don’t need to wait a moment longer as William has remembered.

“Formaldehyde.”

You repeat the word back to him in disbelief. Embalming fluid. Yes this is the moment, right now, where the whole world has gone mad. You barge past William and head for fresh air and the peaceful solitude of your house. This is when you bump into her.

At first, her world was small and perfect. It consisted of the seventeen rooms of a sprawling merchant's house built on the outskirts of the town. Far enough away to be almost in the countryside, near enough for her father to travel to his workplace by omnibus each day or to London when necessary. As a baby from the upper floor windows she could see the hills and moors, surrounding her little universe like a green planetary belt. In winter, the snow-capped moors hugged the house and the land around it. When she began to walk, she found there was a large garden to explore and even though she was told not to venture beyond the sandstone topped walls, she never felt any desire to do so. She was not an adventurous child and was content to look closely at the scarlet corn poppies which appeared suddenly in the garden and then disappeared. She would examine the pollen in the flowers or watch the doves and wood pigeons tentatively eating the crumbs she threw them. In summer, she would run around and play with her Nanny, crawling into the undergrowth of the holly bushes careful not to catch her hair on their prickles.

"Lizzie, where are you, are you hiding?" her Nanny would shout. Giggles would immediately be heard and she would be discovered in a flurry of hugs and kisses.

Her childhood was happy and even discussions about her mother were pleasant affairs. Cuddled up with Nanny and staring at her fingers Lizzie would say, "What were mother's fingers like?"

“They were long and bonny just like yours child,” Nanny would tell her in a soft voice.

“And what did she talk like?”

“She spoke with a sweet little voice like you.”

Lizzie lay back in Nanny’s lap and gazed at the sky.

“What did she say?”

“She used to say that one day she was going to have a beautiful girl called Lizzie.”

“But she never didn’t ever see me though did she?”

“I like to think she did,” said Nanny taking a deep breath, “just for a moment.”

“And then she went away,” Lizzie added.

It was Nanny who kept Lizzie’s mother’s memory alive. Embellishing the few hazy facts that she recalled about the woman who had hired her and whom she’d only seen a fleeting moment of, several years before.

Her father only mentioned his wife on the rare occasions he was home in time to tuck his daughter into bed, but his tales were not as romantic or as detailed as when Nanny reminisced.

“They were just normal fingers from what I remember. She used to squeeze my hand a bit too tight sometimes when we were walking. They were always cold her hands. Now what do you want to know all this for?”

As much as Nanny liked to dwell on sentimental thoughts, her father was not a man to sugar-coat the facts. He was a merchant and a gentleman. His kind did not arrive in the position they were in by viewing the world through dreamy frosted glass. Things were as they were. His wife was dead and things had to move on. His

daughter had to learn to read and write, but he believed that was as much as a young girl needed to know in the world.

“Mealtimes are quite enough time for schooling Elizabeth,” he told Nanny. So over buttered oat cakes they would practice spelling, sipping broth they would practise mathematics and drinking cocoa at bedtime explore the basics of geography. Her father showed her a globe and pointed to where all his cotton came from, before his factory turned it into things, then he would talk at length about the endless products his company made. As much as she enjoyed the stories of faraway places and numbers that meant nothing to her, she didn’t see how she would need any of it in later life. Food and clothing were given to her, she went to church every Sunday and life would happen around her as it had always done. Above all, Lizzie grew up accepting that things were as they were.

“No amount of philosophising will change that,” her father frequently told her. He may have been speaking of other matters though. As several summers went by, things were as they were, but they were not necessarily as they used to be. The gardener came less and less often and the bushes and trees became unkempt, the fish in the pond died and were not replaced and Lizzie naturally began to have thoughts beyond the walls. Stood by the gate, snapping pieces of peeling paint, she asked, “Where do all these people go each day?”

Nanny thought for a while, as if trying to think of a better answer than the truth, before saying, “Oh, all sorts of different places, to the market and to the factories.”

They stood together and watched a man on a horse trot by, followed by a young boy pushing a wooden cart filled with sacking material and beetroots.

“Can we go to market?”

“We don’t need to; everything we need is brought to us.”

“What else do they get at market?”

“Everything, pies, clothes…”

“Can we go and get a pie?”

“Cook makes all our food, we don’t need to go.”

“Will I have to work?”

“I don’t imagine so.”

“Why not?”

Nanny scratched her head and gazed out at the hazy distance.

“Well, your father has a very good job and has lots of money, so you don’t need to work.”

“Don’t you have a father like that? Is that why you work?”

Nanny smiled, “My father has been gone many years now.”

Lizzie followed the woman’s gaze and watched the people and horses getting smaller as they made their way down the muddy tracks that led towards town. It was the same road her father went down every morning and the same road he returned by, sometimes with presents for her. It was the place where bright clothing and exciting picture books came from. How could it not be a thrilling place?

“It’s a silk bonnet,” he said to her one day, holding the lilac blue material up to the light. “It’s so new that you’re the first girl in the whole of England to have one.”

She enjoyed unwrapping these gifts as much as she did reading, wearing or playing with them; the untying of the ribbons and bows, the unfolding of the tissue paper, the smell of newness. Each gift came with a different wrapping material. Before she began dressing her new porcelain-faced doll she smoothed out the soft coloured tissue paper, folded it up and laid it on the pile in a special place in her bedroom, on top of a wooden box with Elizabeth etched on the side.

“Can you take me to town one day?” she asked her father

“Oh, it’s not the kind of place for a young girl to be going. It’s dirty and dangerous. Maybe when you’re a little older we can go.”

She knew the meaning of these words and understood that it meant “No.”

The pile of pastel coloured wrapping paper did not get much higher than her foot over the next few years. The weekly presents became every other week and then monthly until she struggled to remember when her father last brought her a dress or gloves.

“Look,” Nanny said to her, “I’ll show you how we can make this old thing into a new petticoat in no time.”

‘No time’ meant several days and even though the reworked cloth and needlework looked very neat, the finished item did not give her the thrill of a new garment being taken from a fresh box. In fact, Lizzie was even less excited by the muslin, lawn or percale her father brought home. Having to make her own garments took all the fun out of it. It wasn’t the same as being given something finished and ready to use. It did have its advantage though. She would request extra thick material for her pantalettes as the house was getting colder as the years went by. In fact, when she played with her dolls house she would sometimes pretend to be mother and say, “Come into the day room, we don’t use these other rooms because they are very expensive to heat.”

When she was twelve her father came home early one day and spoke to Nanny in private in the kitchen for a few minutes. He then called his daughter to join them. He had been in London several days and had returned sporting a beard. Lizzie looked at the scruffy thing on the strange man and wondered if shaving only existed in Manchester.

“Elizabeth, you’re getting old enough now to do things for yourself like cooking and cleaning, so I’ve asked Lois to leave at the end of the month.”

“Like Cook?”

“That’s correct, like Cook.”

“She doesn’t have to though,” Lizzie said, not knowing quite what she was defending.

“She does, I’m afraid. There’s little point in having someone do the things you can do on your own now,” he said, stumbling for the choice of words. Lizzie furrowed her brow and Lois joined the conversation in an attempt to make the confusion a little clearer.

“Lizzie, you’re a clever young lady and I need to be helping out other young children. Children without mothers who…” she also began to struggle for words.

“Are you sending me out to work?” Lizzie asked.

“Heavens, of course not, but things need to be done in the house and you are old enough to do them now, so we have no need for Lois.”

“Or Cook.”

“Or Cook.”

Things were as they were, Lizzie thought and nodded. Later that evening as she stared out of her bedroom window at the twinkling lights of the mills she thought about the day. Only when things changed did she realize how content she was before. She’d taken the peace and quiet of the house for granted until the house next door had been built. The noise of the carpenters sawing and banging day after day for months on end, made her notice how tranquil it had once been. She had never noticed how spacious the garden was until her father sold half of it for another two

houses to be built on. She'd never considered how much effort and time it took to wash the bed clothes each month until she had to do it herself.

Then father became sick and she became his Lois. It happened slowly, one day he stayed at home in bed, she found it fun at first, bringing him tea and soup and bread. The next month, after a night of coughing he stayed at home several days. And then he stopped going to work completely. His assistant, Mr Walker dropped by twice a week with papers for him to sign and review but neither men ever smiled. The grocery deliveries got smaller and smaller until the daily boys only came every week with small wooden boxes of mangy looking fruit, vegetables and dry meat.

She began to hate the sound of her name being called from the room upstairs.

"Elizabeth?

The clock ticked mechanically in the space.

"Elizabeth?"

"Coming father."

Instead of reading bedtime stories each night, she would study a dog- eared copy of Culpeper's Herbal for medicines and remedies. As she thumbed through the pages, she found the butterfly she'd preserved there months before. Flat and beautiful. It was a large copper lycaenidae, from back when times were happier and when butterflies still came to the garden. This was no time to be maudlin though. There had to be something which would cure her father and make things back to normal. She tried honey, sugar and quince from the tree in the garden in an effort to rid him of phlegm. She tried boiled sorrel and viper's bugloss to remove toxins in his blood. She tried ground chestnut and walnut shells and soaked stinking gladwin in vinegar for him to sip, to purge the poisons and stop the coughing. She tried many things. When her father died she tried not to cry. Things were as they were.

Mr Walker told her he would handle matters and she nodded when she thought it was necessary during the two hours he talked to her. After the funeral he came to visit her every week and told her how impressed he was with her housekeeping. He only saw the entrance hall and day room of the house though. Lizzie had not been in any of the other rooms in months. In the day, even the walnut panelling of the hallway seemed to retain a stone-like chill. She had stuffed long offcuts of material under the doors and around window frames to stop the drafts and slept each night in front of the fire.

When winter came, this two-room existence looked almost snug when Mr Walker viewed it. He stomped the snow off his boots and entered the cosy, dim dayroom.

“I apologize for arriving late Miss Elizabeth, there are hundreds of tinkers leaving town, the roads are full of them, nothing can get past.”

Lizzie went to the window to look. In the dark she could only make out a long row of shapes going by.

“Sooner they leave the better, the thieving, cheating, dirty…” Mr Walker took off his coat and got to the reason of his visit.

“Well, I’ve done all the weekly things,” he said, flicking through pieces of paper. “That’s the butcher, milk, grocer, another grocer, grocer again, coal,”

Lizzie nodded.

“Is there anything else you’ll be needing this week?” he asked. Lizzie thought for a moment and shook her head.

“Well, I’ll best be off then. Make sure you lock the door Miss Elizabeth, there’s not a good thing to say about those vagrant pedlars,” he told her, continuing muttering to himself as he made his way to the road. She waved him goodbye and

then stood on the steps watching the gypsies go by. She reached for her coat, closed the front door and went to stand by the gate, resting her elbows on the wall in the snow. Eyes wide open, she stared at the stream of enormous horses pulling beautiful painted wagons through the white blanket on the ground. She watched with fascination as the traffic creaked by; wheels, feet and hooves ploughing two grooves of dark sludge. The smell of warm damp livestock, cooking and tobacco struck her sharply and she stepped back from the wall.

In all the movement, one boy had stopped and was attempting to re-shoe his animal, ankle deep in the slurry. She watched him for a few minutes before he noticed her. He was about the same age as her and had a face which could have been sixteen or thirty five; an adult frown over childish expressions. She imagined his exciting vagabond life and how he must have travelled all over the country while she had been stuck in the same house for years. His features were very plain and forgettable, allowing her to jump from one thought to the next guessing what kind of boy he was.

"Y'lykthvardo?" he said to her.

She screwed her face up and shook her head. She didn't speak Gypsy.

"Dya loike the Vardo?" he pointed to the waggon, "The Vardo, my wagon."

Lizzie smiled shyly and nodded. How strange he spoke.

"That un's a Brush, they sell all that sorta stuff," he pointed to an overloaded monstrosity, laden down with household utensils, baskets and brooms as it lurched by. As the animals shuffled between them he continued, "That thurs a Reading," he gestured to the passing carriage loaded down with hens in cages hanging on the outside.

"And this ere's Stain."

Lizzie stared blankly.

“That’s not its name, I mean it’s broke, it’s stain’ ere at the side of the road if I don’t fix it,” he said, holding up the horse shoe and grinning. He took a nail from his top pocket and attempted to get the horse to lift its leg with a slap.

“C’mon willya? Nieder ovus wanna be ere on a night like this.”

Lizzie cocked her head.

“Not you Miss, I mean the nag.”

“Would you like a cup of tea perhaps?” she asked him.

“Jeez I would that.”

He weaved through the slow moving flow of animals, stepping over two miserable looking dogs who were trying to avoid the wind and sleet. He held his hand out to her.

“Patrick.”

She blushed and held hers out to him.

“Lizzie.”

He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he turned it and kissed it.

“Charmed, Lizzie.”

“I’ll be back soon,” she said, blushing.

Lizzie went in the house and began to boil the water. A flutter of excitement seemed to have warmed her home. She’d heard that gypsies were thieves and murderers. She’d been told they were dirty, ignorant and selfish. Patrick didn’t seem anything like that. Strange accent aside, he seemed like the perfect gentleman to her. She fetched the teapot and sprinkled a few pinches of tea into it.

She stood on tiptoes in the kitchen and looked through the window, trying to make out what Patrick was doing in the dark out there. He’d been joined by another

boy now who was trying to fix the horseshoe while Patrick stroked the animal's nose. He looked kind.

When she brought the tea out, he was alone again. He put the cup to his lip and knocked the contents back in a single gulp, then smacked his lips with satisfaction.

"Tanksa million for dat Lizzie. Listen, I needa go back to town for something, dya fancy a roide?"

Lizzie said nothing. Patrick continued talking, but had changed his thick accent into that of a sideshow performer, "Come and see d'lovely snowy streets of Manchester from the comfort of a genuine gypsy caravan. Marvel at the rocky banks and icy waters of the River Irk as she snakes her way through the- "

"I would love to but," Lizzie faltered. She wondered what her father would have thought about all this, while at the same time knowing he couldn't think anything. Patrick saw her hesitance and asked, "Will your parents not approve?"

"Oh no, my parents are both dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Y'governess then?"

"No, I live alone."

Lizzie suddenly smiled and said, "Yes, I'd love to come."

Patrick laughed, held his hand up and slowed the wagons while he gestured for her to cross the road. He reached into a trunk on the side of the caravan and passed her a thick woollen blanket.

"If you climb up there. It's sheltered but we'll be outside so you'll need the blanket."

He pointed to a small seat, no more than plank of wood attached to the front of the caravan.

Lizzie squeezed into the space, keeping her eye on the horse in front of her, which up close, now seemed enormous. Patrick shouted something unintelligible to one of his friends as they passed and with another foreign phrase they began to move. The horse neighed as he directed it into the oncoming caravans and shouted, “Coming tru!” at the top of his voice. Almost magically, the traffic began to part. Patrick nodded and waved to the faces they past until the procession of gypsies was over.

The streets got wider and cleaner as the town approached. The huge buildings on either side of them almost blocked out the heavy snow falling. For a moment it was like entering a mountain crevice or a canyon. The cobbled streets were mostly empty and even though Patrick was waving his hands at specific buildings and telling her things, she heard nothing as she was deafened by the sound of the rims of the wheels clattering against the sets.

“Tea and Butter from Sligo,” he shouted, before breaking into an old song about Sligo. He gestured for her to join in but she didn’t know it and shrugged at him. The warehouses on either side of them were the biggest things Lizzie had ever seen and she felt as small and insignificant as a ladybird. Her family name was displayed on one of the buildings in huge brick lettering. She thought of her father again, of all the things Mr Walker had explained about the business being bought and how many times he’d said the phrase ‘nest egg’ when he meant money. In the bat of an eyelid she forgot the past and looked at Patrick with wide mischievous eyes. Patrick patted her on the back and shouted what an impressive street this was.

The ride continued, over a bridge to a part of town where streets began to get smaller and smaller. Lamps burned in windows, smoke fell in clouds and the wheels ran over debris as they progressed further down the winding pathway. The way

ahead was cobbled and intimidating in its narrowness. The darkness was intense as the sky above was blocked out by a multitude of overhanging gables, leaning timber-framed buildings, old weavers cottages with the owners initials carved above their door ways; JE 1607. AY 1594. One of the houses had collapsed, leaving a gap like a missing front tooth. A crowd of people with barrows were crowding round the rubble and salvaging pieces of timber. Then the buildings stopped altogether and gave way to a more open scene of a cemetery and gardens.

"The station of Mr Hunt and his bank," Patrick yelled, "Yeva been dare Lizzie?"

"Once, when I was young," she told him.

"You're still young," he replied, making her blush.

The horses slowed at the edge of a rickety wooden bridge and Patrick said, "Look down."

She edged along the seat towards the side of the bridge and gazed at the water below. The Irk was churning in a semi frozen state. The flow moved huge chunks of ice along with it as it weaved its torturous route. The noise it made was muffled by the sound of the lumps of ice smashing into the sides of small boats moored along the banks.

"I'll be back before you know it," Patrick suddenly told her before scuttling off down an alley at the end of the bridge. Lizzie stared at the water, fascinated at the shapes the foam and slush made as it moved. As frightening as it was, it was still captivating, she thought. Patrick returned a few white snorts of the horses nose later. He jumped aboard with a cloth sack and they began their journey back.

Lizzie was disorientated by the twists and turns they made. Even though they were travelling slowly she had no idea which way home was. It was all too much for her to take in. The icicles hanging from window frames, the strange houses and

squares, the water troughs, sundials and market stalls they passed. All this had distracted her from the moment and the fact she was sitting with a complete stranger and had no idea where she was.

Unexpectedly she noticed that the house in the distance was her own. Patrick smiled at her as he stopped the horse. The road was empty again.

“Thereya go Lizzie, home again. I’ll have some catching up to do now. We should do this oftener.”

Lizzie nodded and said, “Thank you, Patrick.”

Saying the boy’s name felt unnatural. The word seemed odd as she parted her lips to say it.

“I hope you enjoyed yer little scenic tour as much as I did.”

Lizzie nodded. Patrick put his hand on the back of her head and gave her a little peck on the forehead, to which Lizzie had no idea how to respond, so just stepped onto the pavement outside her home and thanked him again.

Patrick looked up at her house, scratched his cheek and said, “Here, take this blanket with you. It’s cold,” and handed her the piece of thick woolly material. Lizzie wrapped it around her shoulders and watched him disappear into the darkness.

She made her way back down the path, head still in the clouds at the whole strange experience. She’d never returned to her own home alone like this. She’d never been out alone with a boy before. A nice young boy. Young man even. All of a sudden, she felt grown up.

She bounced up the steps and reached for the handle. It was no longer cold. There was a warmth burning within her now that ice, frost and sleet had no impact on. As she turned the doorknob, she glanced up and noticed the big brass door knocker was no longer there. She frowned a little and entered her home.

The only thing she said for the rest of that night was, “Oh.”

She said it as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She soaked in what she saw, mouth still frozen in an “oh” position. Stood fixed to the spot in the hallway, letting the blanket drop off her shoulders, she saw the vases were gone, the tables were gone. The rugs from the floor and paintings that had been on the walls were gone. The lamps were gone, the walnut panels had been torn from the brick, revealing the messy mouldy plasterwork beneath.

She shuffled towards the drawing room. The mirrors had gone, the shelves and books had gone. The furniture was gone, even the firewood was gone. Her footsteps reverberated through the house as she made her way to other rooms. Tears began to stream down her face and then, with a shiver, she realized the windows had gone too. As she curled up in the blanket that night, eyes sore from crying, she tried to tell herself that things were as they were.

From this moment on things only got worse. The next morning she awoke and without washing or eating, went to Mr Walker in dirty clothes, to the building with her surname on the side, to explain what had happened. She sobbed and garbled the story to him in and he listened. He gave her a little amount of money there and then from the safe in her father’s old office and said he would sort everything out.

The next day he called at the house and told her the best solution would be to sell it.

“It?” she said confused. The house? She had never thought of her home as an object before.

“Yes, this place,” he told her, gesturing to an empty wall with a clear patch, where a picture had been. He explained it would be preferable if a man looked after the money from the sale and promised to give her a little each week, he told her he had already arranged to rent a room for her near Oldham Road Railway Station.

In her lodgings she was visited each week by an errand boy, who brought her the money as promised. As the years went by, she found the amount he brought couldn’t buy what it once did. She took on little jobs; sewing, picking up and delivering washing and seldom had a moment to think about her present or future. She forgot altogether that things were as they were and instead, at the end of each day, would curl up in her small bed and sleep deeply. When she did think fleetingly about those few days when her life changed, they were hazy and unreal; one moment, one silly choice in life and her entire world had been turned inside out like one of her pretty old dresses, revealing the dirty, broken and worn material inside.

Some days, to save money, she ate nothing and only drank tea. Sugary thick mugs of it that seemed to keep her going more than a plate of food did. Other days she would be given coffee as payment for fixing a dress or looking after a neighbour’s child. She didn’t much like this drink though. It made her stay up all night having thoughts that no woman was supposed to have. It brought frantic questions to her as she watched the sunrise. Where did the clouds go as they floated away from her in the sky? What would she be doing if father had still been alive? She sewed quickly and wondered about her old home, once on the outskirts of the town, it was now no longer an isolated house on a country road, it was in the centre, surrounded with bigger buildings and looked silly and out of place in a view full of soot-blackened warehouses. The house hadn’t moved but it was now somewhere else. She sewed and drank and sewed. The outskirts of the town were now somewhere else, so she

sewed skirts and shirts and remembered the outskirts of the town and the old country lanes that were no longer there. She shook her head, opened the window and threw the dregs of the coffee into the street.

Despite her downfall in life, Lizzie retained her smile and friendly character. One afternoon as she was approaching her door, she noticed a haggard old woman gasping for breath. Everyone on the street stepped aside or pretended not to notice her. Lizzie took pity and asked the woman if she wanted a mug of tea. The old woman smiled a gummy toothless grin back at her.

“Come, come,” Lizzie told the old woman.

Then she noticed the looks she was getting from the other people. They were looks of disgust. She ushered the woman through the door and up the stairs, glancing back over her shoulder to the disapproving eyes of the people in the street. Why should she not help this poor old lady? Just because she had trusted someone before and been robbed didn’t mean she should be suspicious of everyone, she thought to herself, slamming the door. Once inside, Lizzie unlocked the entrance to her one room home and asked the woman to sit on the only chair.

“Here, drink this, you looked very tired,” she said pouring some water from a chipped blue jug. The woman opened her trembling mouth slightly and muttered something resembling a thank you. The putrid smell of her filthy clothes suddenly hit Lizzie and as soon as she handed the glass over and she rushed to open the window.

From the window, with the last golden light shining through the lace, Lizzie thought the old woman looked like someone she knew. For a moment, she thought she had a resemblance to Nanny, but dismissed this straight away.

A few weeks after this incident Lizzie felt under the weather. She tried to recall how much she had eaten in the last few days and whether or not she had eaten any meat or just watery broth as she shifted the huge bundles of clothes from place to place. The days were all a blur, sometimes it was summer, sometimes it was winter. She collected sewing jobs that needed to be completed by the next day and mopped her sweating brow as she ploughed along the streets. She made it to the last job of the day and was asked to wait in the basement with the other servants while the parcel was collected.

Often, as she sat with the other servants, she would be given tea, cake or pieces of meat, sneaked from the household table. She would talk with the other girls who were cooking or cleaning and could relax a little. Today however, she felt light headed and weak. She held onto the wall and closed her eyes.

When she opened them she saw something she recognized. It was the look the people on the street had given the old woman. Only now it was the servants looking at her in the very same way. Scorn and pity, like she were nothing more than a dying pigeon; huddling in a corner waiting to die. She closed her eyes again, hoping when she opened them next, people would be looking elsewhere. She may have been thirty years old and had accepted that no man would make her a wife at that age, but told herself she probably had another twenty years life left in her yet. She wasn't a sick bird.

She heard a servant place a bundle in front of her without saying a word. She opened one eye and the muttering had become whispering and the women were getting on with their jobs again. She took a deep breath, picked the heavy bundle up and staggered up the wooden steps out of the basement.

Her weak footfalls became a march, her flustered state became anger and as she hit the market crowds she barged her way through the people. She was no old woman, she was as strong as on ox.

*

You see she isn't looking where she's going and as you both try and get through the crowd your heads crash together. You step back a little, dazed and stare at each other. You must look quite dishevelled. Sweat running down your face, clutching the four table legs with splashes of poisoned milk spotting your clothes. She has kind eyes and looks out of place in the hustle of the market. You continue to look at her. You are the only two people making eye contact.

She is wearing a faded blue dress that has seen better days and is carrying a large bundle on her shoulders. Instead of being annoyed with you, she asks if she can help.

"Do I look distressed?" you ask her.

She nods and you let down your guard and tell her your name.

"I'm Lizzie," she tells you and gives you her hand, a tiny little soft thing, not the rough hand of a washerwoman, which you'd expected. A moment of tranquillity and peace washes over you. Your breathing returns to normal and a breeze suddenly blows across your faces, cooling yours and sending strands of long fair hair across Lizzie's.

"Can I help you carry the wood?" she asks, "You live near the river don't you?"

You are embarrassed, you may be an old man but the thought of a young girl helping you when she already has a big load is belittling. She could be your granddaughter.

“Yes, I do but, no, thank you,” you tell her, but as you attempt to walk again you feel light-headed and change your mind.

“Perhaps if you could take these two pieces,” you tell her. She repositions the bundle, takes the wood and you both begin to shuffle down a side alley.

You wonder how she knows where you live and without you asking this, she answers.

“I’ve seen you many times when I pick up the clothes.”

You nod and she continues to talk, “I pick them up twice a day from the row near your house, I have to work now, I have a good family name but what’s a name worth? A name doesn’t buy food does it?” she says, making little sense.

Her childlike manner is apparent; despite looking like an adult, her movements are that of a young girl playing at being a grownup. She is educated and you wonder what she is doing dressed the way she is. As you turn into Greenwood Street, she continues talking, “I lived in a big house once, Mr Walker had to sell it though, he gives me a little money each week from the business. He says women can’t own things without being married, so I have to do a little work too.”

For a moment you consider telling her what she says is wrong; only married woman cannot own property because it becomes the property of their husband, but you feel there is a much larger tale behind this girl so you say nothing.

Without hesitation, she asks you, “What was your trade?”

There it is again, the assumption that old means worn out and ready to die.

“I am a luthier, I still make violins,” you say and her face lights up.

“Do you play?” you ask her.

“Many years ago I had lessons but I haven’t played in a long time, my instrument was stolen,” she tells you, her eyes glazing over as she retreats into the memory with a faint smile, which suddenly disappears like it has been slapped from her face.

You are approaching your front door and fumble in your pocket for the key. Lizzie watches your hands clumsily unlocking the padlock. This is the last moment you remember. There are faraway sounds and strange colours whooshing around in your head and the smell of dirt. When you open your eyes you are lying in your bed with a bruise on your face.

For a moment, you wonder if it was all a dream, table legs, young women, formaldehyde, markets. It all seemed so ridiculous. As your senses return, embarrassment comes with the realisation that you are a feeble old man who has somehow been hauled into bed by a sparrow of a girl. As you focus you see Lizzie standing by the doorway.

“Are you better now? A man came with a parcel and I paid him, was that right?” she asks. You remember the varnish ingredients you ordered and assume this is what she is talking about and almost nod to her. She doesn’t seem to require a response and continues talking.

“I was going to make you something to eat but you have hardly anything for me to cook with in the kitchen, no flour, no butter, no bread, no sugar, I can’t even find your stove. I cleaned the floor though, had nothing else to do. I saw the room of violins but didn’t touch any of them, they look beautiful.”

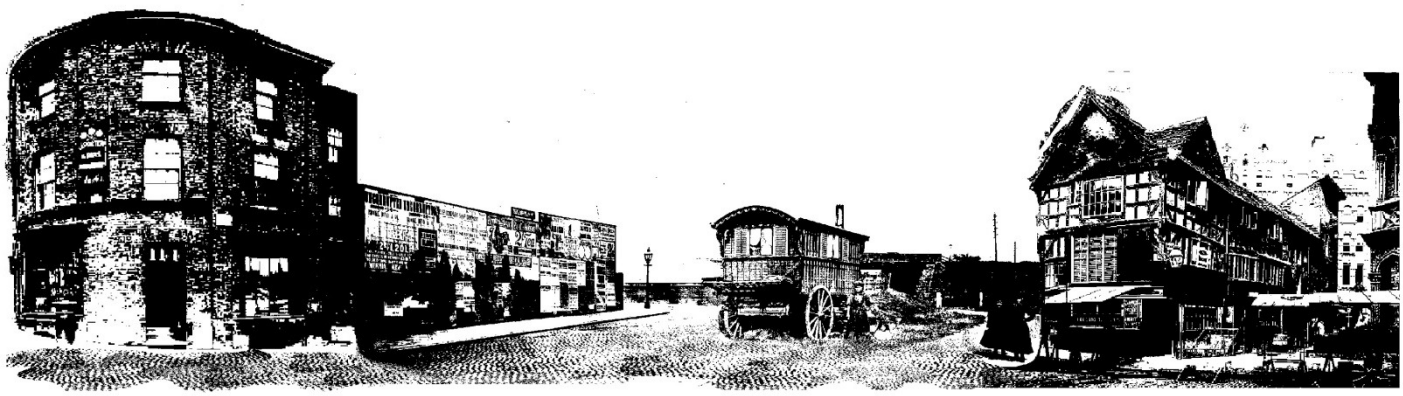
You wonder why she cares for your wellbeing. Why she didn’t just leave you collapsed at the front door or ransack the house as most folk would have done?

“Did you make *all* the violins?” she asks. You nod.

“Please play one of them if you wish,” you tell her. And as you lie in bed, staring up at the smoke blackened ceiling, you hear her shuffle into the workshop and after a few seconds the faint plucking of strings being tuned.

You close your eyes and hear a bow scrape and a horrendous interval, followed by another, which is nearly pleasant, then a third which is perfect.

As you doze off you hear a scrappy melody working its way out of the girl’s memory and the instrument and you smile.



It feels natural to you, her being there. You can't recall asking her to stay or her saying she would, but after a few days she has moved her few possessions into one of the rooms and made it her own. She has taken it upon herself to clean the house from top to bottom, you have bought a range for her and one day over breakfast, you find yourself telling her about your particular diet.

"And you've never eaten a pie?" she asks in astonishment. You shake your head and that's all that's ever said about the subject. She smiles, shakes her head and from then on prepares your meals as you like them, fresh and raw. She's a funny little thing with a fascination for flowers and trees. She plants things in the garden and introduces you to Borage and Puntarelle. She prepares your salads meticulously; broad beans arcing round spinach leaves, slivers of horseradish scattered over slices of beetroot, all laid out with as much detail as an Italian fresco.

In the day, you sit in the workshop tinkering with things. You discover that now you are not alone in the house, progress appears to be fast. Before Lizzie, you could spend years working on parts of various instruments, never completing a single one. Since Lizzie arrived, you have been assembling and completing violins in record time. You don't know if this is because of Lizzie or because of the previous decades of solitary hard work with no distractions made it so. Your work is stacking up.

You also find that time can still surprise you. It's an elusive cloud hanging over your life. Just when you'd stopping counting the decades, time appears from nowhere, does a little pirouette and says, "Watch this."

Time isn't just moving past you and leaving a tide mark. It refuses to be pinned down. The time you thought you were acquainted with is now somehow different when Lizzie is around and part of it.

In the summer evenings, you both sit in the garden together. Not talking, just sharing silence together and listening to the river trickling by.

When winter comes, you sit together and watch the fire as you huddle round it for warmth. You both seem to be content with the lack of conversation. If something needs to be said it will be, you tell yourself.

One morning she comes in the workshop, sits on a pile of wood, looks at all the instruments hanging and asks, "Do you ever wonder where they all go?"

You'd never really thought about this before. You are merely a maker of elaborate wooden boxes. You put the things together, sold them, released them into the unknown, now and again you saw old instruments return for repair or adjustment but normally that was it, they were gone forever.

Now, you begin to think about it. Your creations, your instruments were in the hands of all walks of life. You remember some of the faces, strange names and accents of your customers. Your violins were played by the string sections of orchestras, both nearby and those that passed through the town, amateur and professional. They hung on the walls of public houses and rowdy drinking dens and played reels and jigs for drunken Irish musicians. They adorned the walls of pawnshops and sat silent in the closets of people who failed to master their bowing technique. They travelled from town to town with circus folk, played not on stage but

after the shows in caravans and by campfires. They were passed down by tinkers or sold, bartered and swapped when times were bad. They were smashed by jealous lovers, stolen by servants, accidentally sat on by short sighted nannies. They were played at Jewish celebrations, Moorish dances, by the tone deaf, the practising, the accomplished and uninterested pupils.

You sum it up quickly, “They go all over I imagine,” you say, “merchants, gypsies, musicians, students….” When you say ‘gypsies’ her eyes narrow and she looks down into the barrel of water at her side, dipping her hand absentmindedly into it.

“What’s this for?” she asks you, changing the topic.

The pieces of wood soaking in the barrel are there to develop the tone. You know that the best violins are made from trees which have been moved by water. Trunks transported down the river Po to the luthiers of Italy. The water soaks into the pieces and adds something, a warmth, a life. Your barrels are filled with gallons of filtered water taken from the Irk running past the bottom of your garden, nothing as romantic as the Po. But the wood still absorbs the water. The instruments that leave your workshop are taking a little piece of this with them too. The people who play your violins are playing a whisper or an echo of that river, transmitted through the spruce bellies and maple backs.

“It makes the wood sound better,” you tell her and with that she leaves you in peace again. You brush the dust from the front of your leather apron and inhale deeply.

The aged wood smells good, you close your eyes and savour the soft scent of the shavings as you brush them off the violin belly. Over the next few hours, the piece of wood becomes thinner and smoother. Time seems to stand still. You tap the wood

and listen to its faint cry. You drink several glasses of milk as you work and suddenly it is dark outside and you have to stop.

You look around the workshop by candlelight and survey the dozens of semi-finished instruments. The necks, the backs, the bodies and suddenly something washes over you unexpectedly. You find yourself thinking of Lizzie. Thinking of Lizzie's neck; pale, soft and hidden by frills and collars. Lizzie's body, a deceptively strong little thing that has been cleaning your house for years now, preparing your peculiar meals without complaint and sometimes testing out your violins. You cannot look at the pile of violin backs without thinking of Lizzie's beautiful back, which you once accidently glimpsed in winter when she was bathing by the fire.

These feelings, these thoughts are a shock to you. You are an old man who has never been interested in or experienced physical pleasure with a woman before. You are old enough to be her grandfather and find it sickening that you are having these kind of ideas. But the love that you feel, if that's what it actually is, is the same feeling you feel for your instruments. An affection has somehow become mixed up with another.

Until this moment you didn't even realize you cared for her. She was like a loyal dog, a companion who caused you no problems and that you were happy to have around the house.

You are light headed upon realizing something had been lurking at the back of your mind all this time against your will. You take the candle and make your way up the three rickety wooden steps into the kitchen where Lizzie is sitting in front of the fire, knees curled to her body, snug in a long blue dress and sipping a mug of tea. The crackling pops of the fire fill the room. She sees you come in and blow out the candle, she smiles at you. These are the moments you like. They are just the same

as your hours in the workshop. No words exchanged but a subtle understanding of things. The unspoken conversations the two of you have make you both feel safe and secure.

Sometimes you do talk though. She tells you stories from books she has read and you reminisce on the little you remember about your homeland all those years ago and how different Manchester was when you arrived from how she knows it to be. You have nothing against talking if there's something to say.

"There is something still present of that old place, the character is still here, but back then it was so much smaller and..," you trail off as you try and find the words to adequately describe what you mean.

This evening though, Lizzie seems deep in thought. She has often looked like she was about to tell you something but tonight she does. After a while she says "Thank you," and you look at her confused. After another long silence she says, "A long time ago I trusted someone and they took everything from me. Thank you for not doing the same."

You are still confused and she sees this.

"He was a traveller, he was leaving town. He took me out on his wagon in the snow while his friends removed all my possessions from my house. He stole my life that night. Now I sit here in the warmth with you I think about the coldest night of my life."

She holds her little hand out to you. You take it but are unsure of what to say, before whispering, "Not everyone is bad."

You believe this too, despite the conflict it causes in your conscience. You think of the men whose lives you have ended. Did they all really need to die? Were *all* of them bad men? You leave these unresolved thoughts for another time and get

back to the present. Now you know why she always got jumpy and unpredictable each year when the gypsies came back to town, why she would check the locks on the doors and close the shutters on the windows. You smile at her.

Even though just the two of you are sitting there by the fire, you become acutely aware of a third presence in the room. Time. Lizzie has lived with you for several years now and as you sit there, warm and content, a thought sears through your mind; you will see her die. You aren't being morbid. It's a stark, cold fact. You will see her die. You have grown fond of her but she is ageing much faster than you and you will definitely outlive her. The fact saddens you. What cruel trick was life playing? You have already seen many children grow up then have children and those children grow up and die. Only the trees look down on you as a youngster, they waft their branches with an unimpressed swish knowing that providing they are left alone, they will outlive you. You feel better with the knowledge that some things judge centuries in a similar way to you.

In front of the warmth of the fire, you contemplate time and heat. Two things that everyone is aware of but few really understand. You think how they are unique to the person experiencing them. They are unquantifiable, uncapturable, impenetrable. Yet here they both are, the fire whispering, "I can be much more powerful than this if you give me a chance," and time, nodding to Lizzie and saying "Just watch what I'm going to do to her."

You want to take Lizzie and hide from time. Like you'd done when cholera came to the town. Back then, it was death you were hiding from. It was like death was camping out in your garden, seeing who could wait the longest. You'd ordered many things to be delivered so you didn't need to leave the house for months. You'd seen the bodies piled up in Angel Meadow and the fear in the eyes of the living. The place

had become a ghost town with the smell of the corpses somehow drifting into the house even though the windows and doors had not been opened in weeks. Hiding from disease was not dissimilar to hiding from detection you'd thought. It just took a little foresight, thought and planning. You'd wondered how disease found people, why it chose some and not others and came to the conclusion that isolating yourself was the best thing. You consider yourself an expert at fighting things that do not physically exist; disease, time, nature, progress.

You stockpiled provisions, packed cases of fresh carrots, beetroot, turnips and apples in sand so they would last longer. You would sit this out.

It was a dangerous time, more dangerous than political unrest. A silent killing was going on. And you wondered why you wanted to live so much. You'd already lived a hundred years. Wasn't it just greedy to want more? But you were motivated. Not by violins or fear of death, but by the need to finish what had been started. When *that* was over with, only then would you be ready to die. Fear of death was natural you reasoned. Nobody would choose to die of cholera. A foul, polluted disease to accompany the polluted diseased town and its polluted river.

Back then, you had sat it out. This time it wasn't cholera. It wasn't anything you could control.

Time and nature are uncontrollable. You know that.

*

"It's broken its banks now," Lizzie cries from the kitchen. You take off your apron and join her looking out of the window. She has been standing there for hours, watching

the water level rise, creeping, lapping slowly up your long garden, inch by inch; into the rapidly filling cinder pit, around the legs of your apple press.

Somewhere upstream something has failed; a dam, a reservoir, a bank. Something has happened and the water is now angry and quickly approaching the wall of the house.

Lizzie opens the back door and kneels down to look at the water.

“Will it be alright?” she asks you.

“The house is a little higher than the river level, but the workshop is below it, can you help me move some things?”

She nods and you both make your way down into the cellar.

You tell yourself that the water probably won’t make it this far. But if it did, you know it would fill the room at least to waist height.

You move sacks and boxes of necks, backs and tools, placing them on the stairs or hanging them from beam hooks. When you are finished, you both go outside and stand in the pouring rain, the gushing stream has fattened and is mud brown. It is transporting a vast amount of debris as it goes by; battered muddy tulips, branches, planks of wood, rags and sewage. Most of the garden is now under water. There is a beast where the river once was.

The next morning you are awoken by a banging at the front door. You get out of bed and see Lizzie, wading knee deep in the garden, hanging and beating soaked rugs and clothes on the line. The whoosh of the raging river is now so loud she hasn’t heard the banging.

When you open the door you find a young man standing there with a dead rabbit over his shoulder and holding a goat tied to a piece of string.

“Y’still have fiddles?”

“Yes, would you like to buy one?”

“Nah, I’m needing strings,” he tells you, patting the goat.

“Do you need to buy one or a set?” you ask him.

“Well, how bouts I chop wood f’you or maybes gi’ya little rabbit?”

You tell him you aren’t interested, you only want money.

He ignores what you tell him.

“I’ve got some gradley gems,” he says, reaching inside his pocket.

“No, I’m not interested in jewels either, if you have money I have strings but otherwise…” your attention is drawn to the street now. The dirt is rising. Underneath it, a thin layer of water is moving. The liquid is crawling beneath the soil and horse manure and forming a large pool on the uneven street. You look at the levels of the buildings around. They were built after your house and are at a lower level. Their basements will flood first.

The goat notices the water that is suddenly around its hooves. It bleats a little and does a little dance to try and avoid the liquid before returning to chewing.

You move to shut the door and the man suddenly says, “Ah jeez alright, ah’ve got some brass.”

You gesture for him to come inside and he follows.

“If you’d like to take a seat in there, I’ve had to move things in case the basement floods, I’ll just have to locate the strings. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“T’d be grand aye,” he says, taking a seat and dropping the goat’s string.

You hear Lizzie coming back inside the house and ask her to mash a fresh pot for your customer. You curse to yourself as you rummage through the boxes for the strings. You have only moved the things yesterday, why can you not find them? Your

mind wanders to the worst possible outcome. What damage will the water do if it rises as far as the wooden frame of the house? It would take years for it to dry out. It would rot. The wattle and daub walls would be ruined. Will your entire home be destroyed by this flood? Your father's solid handiwork brushed aside by some water.

You think about how much money you have saved. Daydream about building a new house on the same piece of land. You imagine Lizzie in this new house. Your future consists of her now. It's a strange feeling. The last few years have been filled with strange feelings.

You find the strings and are brought back to reality. When you go back to the kitchen Lizzie is sitting opposite him and is as white as a ghost.

The man hasn't noticed her face and is chunnering away regardless, "We've had to move caravans. The goats and the pullen w'none t'pleased, never hoid 'em cluck s'loud, such a ruckus from em coz they got a bit wet, the water was up to the axles, but I suppose that's why they're on wheels, can't do dat if y'livt in a house y'see…."

You stand behind the man and look at the shock on Lizzie's face. She mouths to you, "IT'S HIM."

You glance down at the back of the man's head as he slurps tea and chatters away to nobody. Without a moment's thought you exactly know what she means and what has to be done. You space a section of the long gut strings between two of your fingers and take a deep breath.

It's all too easy. You drop the loop over his head and under his chin, bring your hands together and pull as hard as you can.

You may be an old man, attacking a young fit man but the sheer panic and shock of the moment works in your favour. He instinctively tries to grab the cords

around his throat. You know he will never escape this way. No matter how strong he is, he will never be able to prise them away from his neck.

You look at the table to check if there is anything he could reach to defend himself with but there is only a rabbit and a mug of tea and you don't believe he will be able to rise above the panic of strangulation to think clearly, grab something and plan an escape.

He splutters and whines as you garrotte him. The goat tilts its head to one side and stares vacantly at you. Then you see Lizzie's expression. It's not exactly a smile but also not fear anymore.

"Do you remember me?" she says softly to the man.

You can't see his face but hear his feet pathetically stamping and kicking under the table.

"I remember you, Patrick," she says to the man, spitting out his name like it tastes bitter.

As the choking continues, you wonder what the man is thinking, if he remembers Lizzie or the evening he destroyed her life.

She is concentrating, staring at the man's face as he wheezes his final breath. Her hands are clenched tight, as if it is her, not you, killing him.

Then he is still. You maintain the grip for a moment or two longer, in case he is just unconscious and then take your hands away.

Lizzie stands up, takes a step towards you and hugs you. You hear the sniffle of her crying and feel her little body shudder and sob. A happy sob.

"I didn't recognize him until I handed him the tea," she says through gasps.

"Shhhhh," you tell her, "It's over now."

She withdraws from the embrace and stares at you. It looks as though a huge weight has been lifted from her life. You cannot describe the facial expression she has but assume it is one of great relief. She sometimes looks like this when sleeping.

When night falls, you empty the man's pockets and find a small knife, some coins (not enough to pay for the strings), a bottle of gin, no jewels of any description and a wad of foreign bank notes with printing only on one side. You empty the bottle, burn the forged money and with the help of Lizzie, drag the body to the back door. You push him over the threshold. He lands in the filthy water with a splash face up; his bulging eyes still open and with a pleading expression fixed on his face.

He begins to slowly drift down the garden before coming to a halt. This floating man is snagged on something and bobs up and down as the current tries to tug him along. You think for a moment that you will have to wade over there and push the corpse past where the embankment is. But suddenly he is free and taken into the surge of moving water. The current is fast and in seconds all traces of Patrick are gone and absorbed into the darkness. The river has dealt with the matter perfectly. You didn't even have to leave the house.

"This week you will have the choice of goat or rabbit," you say to Lizzie.

Time keeps its promise, time doesn't forget. As you work, you are lost in thought, being brought back to the present by time in the form of the clunk of your father's old one handed clock, high up on the windowsill in front of you. Its solitary black pointer being moved forward by the cogs. It is an object from another era. From an era where people cared less about time, when they woke when it was light and stopped working when the job was done. In a succession of gentle clunks from the one handed clock, months go by. You work, you sleep, Lizzie heats her potage by the fire. Each day she eats a little and adds a little more. Grain, oats, barley, vegetables and pieces of meat. The thick soup changes slowly but somehow always remains there in the blackened pot. The same potage altering slightly as time goes by. The contents bubble, Lizzie eats a little and then adds a few new ingredients to be simmering away for tomorrow. Sat at your workbench, you have a similar experience. You are selling instruments, repairing instruments, making instruments. The workshop barely changes though. Things in this room have remained this way for over a hundred years. You are making painfully slow potage.

You run your fingers over the maple block in the corner of the room. This is what it feels like to touch time. Trunk rings of time. These little grooves are seasons; light band, dark band, light band. Summer and winter displayed before you. You look at a section no more than the length of your hand and estimate this to be the average human life span. You come out of your workshop a few times each day. Little things

around the house change but you don't notice any big difference. Lizzie's book is in a different place, the ladle is shinier, the fire place is blacker, the labels on the jars are new or faded or gone, the weeds in the garden higher and Lizzie's hair is grey.

Maybe it was always slightly grey you tell yourself. Were the little wrinkles on her neck always there though? You glance at your own hands. Have they changed much since you met Lizzie? You hadn't noticed. Certain dexterous tasks in the workshop had taken longer than in previous years but you were getting older too, why did you think other people played by your rules?

"When did your hair colour fade?" you ask her, wondering if this is a rude questions to ask a lady.

Lizzie laughs and blushes, "Oh it's been a long time since I've had a chestnut shine," she says giggling like a young girl, both charmed you have noticed and pleased it took you so long to do so. Now you have observed this, other things come flying at you like they had all happened overnight.

You smile back and see her face is cracked and marked. Her left eyelid hangs slighter lower than the right one and her hands shake a little.

"And yet you still look the same as the day I met you," she says, giving you a strange kind of stare, one that you've never seen before.

The same wheels that were set in motion on the Seller family are also turning on Lizzie. She is a wound clock that can only run down and will one day stop working.

You don't notice how quickly the time passes, the summers in the garden, the honey, the hours spent varnishing, the winters, the storms, the endless dust from the building sites, the hammering of progress, the shadow cast by the railway arches, moving closer and closer you your home as the building is extended, the stack of

Lizzie's magazines growing as they are read and shrinking as the fire is lit, the planting of vegetables and flooding which washes them away.

During one of the many floods, as Lizzie cowers by the fire inside, you stand up to your knees in the water and talk to the fattened river. It tugs at your calves with power and you encourage it to destroy, tell it to do its worst, to show people of who is really in charge, to tear down the squalor and wash away the filth. You watch as empty boats break and smash together in a bottleneck below you and the water disappears into the blackness to surge onwards and be someone else's devastation tomorrow.

1900 has come and gone and Lizzie had remarked to you that this century didn't feel any different to the last one. You want to tell her it did feel different. The 20th century felt a thousand years away from the 19th and 18th centuries.

By winter 1906 you are sat by her bedside listening to her shallow breathing. Her soft, slow exhalations are joined by a slight raspy wheeze, like a bow being dragged across damped strings. You count down from 50 in your head, knowing she won't reach single figures.

49. You remember the first time you met her, that day at the market. 48. Her meals; the way she sprinkled nutmeg over milk in winter. 47. The little songs she sang in the garden when she thought you couldn't hear. 46. Her expression when you killed the gypsy. 45. Her endless sewing and repairing of clothes and material. 44. How engrossed she became when reading a new book. 43. The endless amount of lauristinus she planted in the garden. 42. The smell of the marchepane she made in spring. 41. How she was just as excited every time she heard an orchestra perform. 40. The way her hands twitched when she fell asleep in front of the fire. 39.

The stories she told you about her mother. 38. The little drawings she added to the labels on the jars in the kitchen. 37.

"Lizzie? Lizzie?"

You check to see if she is still breathing. She is not. You sigh and walk out into the garden. There is a pigeon sat on top of one of your beehives. The same white speckled one that Lizzie liked to give crumbs to. Today, it vexes you that this bird is trespassing in your garden, soiling the roof of your hives. You walk towards it and shoo it away with a shout and a flap of your arms.

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The pigeon sees the old man approach and launches itself off the beehive into the air. It flaps frantically and rises over the chimney smoke, the rooftops, the people and train carriages, high above the factory and mills. It glides over the dye works, the bleach works, the tanneries and is now well beyond the local area it is familiar with.

It considers turning around and going back to the garden with the big white flowers in it, in case the woman who usually feeds it has returned. It considers the other nearby yards where it can peck around in the dirt beside the hens and the pigs, who rarely bother it. It considers going back home underneath the railway bridge over the river where it is safe and warm. But today, what could almost be described as a thought pops into its head, perhaps more of an urge than a thought.

It's a very un-bird-like feeling. It feels full of energy and climbs higher in the sky. Above the tall chimneys, into the thick belt of vast greyness towards the faint glowing circle in the sky above. It will explore, far away from here, far away from the rest of the other scraggy one-footed diseased birds.

After a while, its wing butts begin to ache and it slows down beating, riding the warm acrid smelling air that hits it and carries it further upwards. It knows no fear, only avoidance of objects. Avoid the things that aren't food. Here there are no objects. It climbs higher. Its tiny beady eyes blinking and smarting as the black smoke thins.

Then there is blue sky, cold icy blue sky and it is gliding above the fluffy cumulonimbus directly below it.

Another new feeling for its pigeon brain to process; an entirely new panorama. Why hadn't it come up here before? Why are there no other pigeons up here too, breathing this delicious rich air? Has this place always been here?

After a few minutes flying, with no point of reference it descends back through the clouds, expecting to return to the black and white world it left. The scene it finds is completely different though. Below it now are only fields, ponds, zigzagging paths and the occasional farmhouse. It swoops down at great speed and lands on a thatched cottage roof.

Upon first glance, all pigeons appear to be confused. They cock their heads, giving the impressions they are trying to understand something and pace almost randomly around, again giving the impression they have no idea what they are doing. This white speckled pigeon however was having an epiphany. All the time it had been in the filth and squalor of Manchester, all the time it had been avoiding the wheels of carriages, hooves of horses, dogs, cats, mites, rats and people; all that time, this beautiful quiet place had been here, pigeonless. It cocked its head and strutted to the edge of the roof.

Down in the garden below, amongst the rusting farm-machinery there were several chickens, a trough of water and a sweeping blanket of grain and grit. It drifted

down in an effortless wing movement and began eating. After it was full to bursting, it found a warm sheltered nook next to the chimney and thatch and closed its eyes. When it was asleep, it began to dream, but its dream never got any more fantastical than the last few hours it had experienced. It dreamed of flying, dreamed of eating, dreamed of things that it couldn't be sure had happened.

When it opened its eyes again, unfluffed its wings and began preening itself, it found it was another fine clear day. Just like in the dream. There was little sound save the crackling of a small fire burning in the corner of the garden and the occasional clucking of chickens.

It didn't stray from the roof much of that day, for everything it needed was within reach. It ate more of the grain and grit, drank until it was full and went back to the warm nook to watch the world go by. In the distance, it saw signs of danger, much bigger birds catching voles and rabbits. It wasn't concerned, it need go no further than here.

As the afternoon wore on a person came out of the cottage and jabbered away to it, strange noises and sounds, which meant nothing as the stranger cooed over its unusual speckling and encouraged it to come closer with pieces of bread, which it happily ate without getting any nearer.

Back on the roof again, it dozed and began to wonder if there were other pigeons nearby, looking in the distance at the smoky clouds and the opposite direction where the big birds were.

Then the person was back in the garden again, hanging rugs on the line and returning from the house with a big flat cane construction with circular shapes branching off it.

The first few loud beats spooked the bird and it instinctively flew off, away from the house, away from the bigger birds and smoky towns to another unknown place. Heart beating fast it headed into the wind, below it could see only green and bits of rock jutting out from it. When it felt less startled, it descended and noticed two figures below, walking away from each other. Then it heard a loud crack.

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As Lizzie's coffin is lowered into the ground, you sigh and realize that this period of your life is over. You don't want to let it go, to push it to the back of your mind with the deaths of your mother and father and the others, but have no choice. When something is over, you tell yourself, when something has come to its logical conclusion, it must be filed away and marked as complete. But how do you do this when the time you spent with Lizzie is bookended by something else? Something unfinished. The names and faces fly erratically through your head like a moth. It is 1906 and although you haven't been keeping very much of an eye on Albert Serah, the last time you checked he was still a healthy single man in his twenties who showed no sign of starting a family. You think that maybe it's all over, rather undramatically, with this man.

As was now routine, his father, William had died, the year Albert was born, the same year you met Lizzie. Died. You find it funny that this word comes into your head. Like his passing was somehow natural and in no way involved you.

That day at the market, a lifetime ago in 1883, his comment had slipped by you because you were flustered, but the next day as you lay recovering, you mulled it over and what he said had bothered you.

“Fresh as my new born bairn,” he had said. Was this something he said to everyone to get them to buy his rancid milk? As soon as you felt better, you left Lizzie at home and made your way back to the market. This time you went in the early hours of the morning when people were still unpacking their wares and the gas lamps were still faintly illuminating the streets. Near the fish market, the gas lighting changed to the glow of oil lanterns and you saw William sitting by a wall with another man. Predictably, he was gambling.

Both the men were clutching dog-eared playing cards to their chest and William was smiling. You had long since thought gambling to be a fool’s game. If someone was skilled and playing a novice, it could almost be described as theft. If all parties involved were doing it because they desperately need money, then they were all fools for risking something they couldn’t afford to lose.

As you approach the pair, you see coins exchanged; it appears on this occasion William has won. His face doesn’t appear particularly happy though. It bears the same vacant furrowed brow that his family all seemed to share, like winning wasn’t quite enough unless it had involved nearly losing everything. Like father like son could be his family’s motto.

William sees you are carrying a jug and jumps to his feet ready to serve you. The other man calls him by his surname as he leaves, there is a sneering tone of voice, he is only saying the name to annoy William.

“Sarah,” he says and slinks off.

The only slightly interesting thing about William’s family tree is the way the surname has been altered and corrupted over the years. He is William Sarah only because his father, who was called Serrer, was poor at reading and writing. Serrer was only Serrer, again, because of bad handwriting. His father had been named

Seller. In turn, William, either embarrassed by the feminine name or as inept at reading and writing as the rest of his family, would go to record his son's name as Serah on the birth certificate. A name chipped and eroded over time by carelessness like the stone sets of the streets his family walked over.

"Milk ol' timer?" he says idiotically to you. It is the only thing he peddles and there is no one else around selling anything.

"Yes," you tell him and then try to tease him into what you wish to know. "Just how fresh is it?"

He places the lid back on the pail and stands straight, as if he is about to make a great political speech.

"You spat it out last time dint ya? Well, I'll tell ya, it's as fresh as my new born son."

Really. Obtaining information from this man was too easy.

"Do you tell that to every fellow or is it the truth?"

"Honest to god truth, little baby boy by the name of Albert. Little Albie," he says, eyes glazing over. As he remains lost in his own thoughts you start pondering how you are going to kill him.

It's always a strange moment. When given decades to plot and plan a man's death you would expect someone to have a long list of strategies and ideas. You have always left the decision until the moment the son has been born though. Maybe because you believe planning things far in advance often leads to reliance on the way you have imagined it all to happen. It doesn't keep you alert and on your toes. It's much like violins you've often told yourself, you can't just take any old piece of wood and start hacking away until it's a violin. You have to wait, reflect, let the situation take over until the answer manifests itself.

“And anyway,” he tells you, grabbing your jug, “even if it’s not very fresh, it’s still a damn sight safer than the water.”

This you can agree with him on. You are old enough to remember the day the well on Fountain Street ran dry. The confusion and panic in the town that others might follow. Drinkable water had been the hardest thing to find in the last few decades.

“And as for the beer,” he says to you, as the warm thick milk glugs into the jug. He rolls his eyes and sighs.

You don’t know what he’s talking about. He sees your expression and raises his voice, “You haven’t heard?”

You shake your head.

“Where’ve you been living, down a mine? People been dropping dead all over from the ale. There’s summat bad gone in it. That tuppeny brew is like suppin a pint of poison. There’s talk of arsenic being sneaked into it.”

You are intrigued and confused at the same time. Why would brewers want to kill off their customers?

“Arsenic being sneaked into the barrels on purpose like,” he tells you in a stage whisper.

“Why would someone do such a thing?”

“Well, it’s someone with a grudge innit? It can’t be detected, you can’t see it or taste it or-” the milk begins to overflow and William jolts the pail upright to stop it, the chunks of cream splattering his shoes.

“Who knows?” he says.

A few minutes ago, you simply wanted to know if he had become a father and what sex the child was, now all your problems have been resolved. William has told

you all you need to know and even gone as far as suggesting a way you can kill him. Could the task be any easier?

William continues talking about the wild theories he has heard; mill owners or the church killing alcoholic sinners, rival breweries wiping out competition and foreign elite organisations trying to eliminate the workforce of Manchester in order to shift power elsewhere.

You are now concentrating on the specifics of your particular murder.

Things fall into place the next morning. One of your customers Dr Hunt, calls to pick up his violin which you have recently repaired. He regularly drops by to ask you questions about his instrument or to discuss possible modifications to his bow, but like his father before him, he seldom brings you any actual work, tending more to use you as a quicker way of finding something out without having to sit in the library all day looking for it. He also often talks of buying one of your creations and will sometimes go as far as taking money out of his wallet to pay. The only two things he had ever purchased from you are a children's violin, which he picked out when he was five years and strictly speaking, his father paid for, and the full size instrument you have just added another new fingerboard to.

He examines your work and tries it out in the workshop, playing fast runs and arpeggios in different positions of the neck.

You seize the opportunity and get straight into what you want to know.

"Doctor Hunt, may I ask you, is there any truth in the rumours I've heard about arsenic in beer?"

He stops playing and raises an eyebrow, “It is a fact. I myself have treated dozens of patients, none of whom have survived. The newspapers are as yet unaware of this though. Tell me, how did you hear about it?”

“A few people mentioned it to me, warned me to stay away from tuppenny ale”

“Yes, that would be wise,” he says before tuning the instrument again and inspecting your work.

“Is it unusual?” you ask.

“No, the angle is perfect, in fact the ebony is-”

“Sorry, I don’t mean the violin, I meant the poisonings.”

“Not really, there have been many cases recently, Liverpool, Leeds, Preston, Leicester…..” he says, beginning to play an inappropriately chirpy folk melody.

“It’s not just the people who drink it who are affected either, I’ve seen babies poisoned by their mother’s milk too.”

He puts down the instrument and reaches for another hanging above him.

“May I?” he asks you.

“Of course,” you say gesturing him to play, hoping he will continue talking.

He does.

“I wouldn’t call it an epidemic yet but it’s certainly a very big problem being kept quiet because of the panic it will cause.”

“Why *is* it being kept quiet?”

“There’s more money in beer than there is in burying people,” he says categorically.

You want to ask more questions but are aware it will seem suspicious trying to find out exactly how to poison someone and what the death will involve. Dr Hunt

seems happy talking about the subject as he plays though, so you reach for an old unusual violin with a shorter neck, which was once fashionable, and pass it to him.

“Here, have you ever played on one of these?”

He takes it from you and begins to tune it.

“Of course this happened in Paris a few decades ago; thousands of people died. Arsenic was accidentally put in cakes, bread, beer, practically everything. It doesn’t taste of anything. Sheep Dip is usually the cause; it looks like flour so people mistake it. They make it yellow and people think its mustard powder. Whichever colour they make it, people still end up dying,”

He hands you the fiddle back and takes another from the rack.

“And is it a bad way to die?”

“No way is a good way to die,” he says, staring at you while simultaneously checking the straightness of the neck. “Arsenic poisoning is particularly horrible though.”

You sit on your work chair to show the Doctor that you are eager to know the details. He positions the violin back under his chin and shifts his gaze from the fingerboard to you, talking as he plays.

“The cases I’ve seen all begin with nausea and vomiting, the body gets rid of as much of the poison as possible. The eyes run, voice goes hoarse, the skin reddens like ink has been spilled on it. They called it vagabond disease because of the darkening colour, like a gypsy. The pain increases until even morphine can’t help. Then the patients fall into paralysis, a dream like state where they….” He stops to tune the D and A string.

“Where they?”

“Die,” he says quietly.

“How does sheep dip get in the beer?” you ask, now trying to scheme how you can get hold of the poisoned drink in order to give it to William, who is acutely aware that it could be tainted.

“It isn’t sheep dip this time. I’ve seen you in the reading rooms, you must have seen the stories in the newspapers about the Pure Beer movement. Adding glucose to beer instead of malt is a very new development.”

“I’m what some would call a Prestonite, I don’t drink beer, so haven’t really paid much attention to those reports.”

“Well, once again, it’s cheaper and faster to make beer with glucose. The glucose is made by boiling starch in sulphuric acid and the sulphuric acid itself is made from iron pyrites rich in arsenic.”

The chemistry has lost you completely. By the way the doctor has suddenly stopped talking, you get the distinct impression he too has reached the end of his understanding on the subject.

“This is just a theory though; people have also been poisoned from drinking beer which hasn’t been made with glucose. The coke used to dry the grain in the oasthouses leaves ash which contains arsenic.”

“Do you think it’s being put in the beer intentionally?”

“Murder?” the Doctor laughs, hanging the violin back up, “Heavens no, why go to such complicated measures when you can just buy it from chemist for a penny?”

He leans towards you and into the corner of the workshop.

“Even you my friend have enough down there to kill half the town,” he tells you pointing to the brown paper bag of rat poison.

When he leaves, you take the bag out of the corner and place on the workbench.

The next day you are back at the market, this time with a jug of “fresh” milk, laced with the poison. You pour out a small amount for William in a chipped mug and ask him to drink.

“Why? I’ve got my own.”

“This is fresh.”

“Mine is fresh.”

“This hasn’t got that chemical yours has got in it though.”

William looks unconvinced. For a second you hope he isn’t going to suggest that you drink some first. If he does, you are going to have to act the clumsy old fool and accidently drop both items and hope they smash when they hit the ground.

William is far more dependable in other ways though.

“I bet you thrupence you’ll find my milk more pleasant than yours.

Bait cast. William nods and says, “Aye yeron.”

He knocks back the milk and immediately says, “Nah, I prefer mine.”

You have to play along for a few moments, insisting that surely he found the milk slightly better than his.

“No, I liked mine better,” he says with an outstretched palm. Before the coins are out of your pocket he is craning his neck looking for someone. Someone to gamble with. You have no sympathy. You place the money in his palm. He will probably not live long enough to spend his winnings. Sometimes you wish murdering people was more of a challenge.

This wasn’t 1883 anymore though. Your thoughts only went backwards. It was still 1906 and she was still dead. For her, 1883 was literally a lifetime ago, her lifetime. Things were darker now.

In the past few years, the filth of the town had become hard to ignore. Clean clothes left to dry outside often looked dirtier than when they were wet. The dirt manifested itself relentlessly on every part of your life. The brick and whitewash of the house had become black. The propolis you used to make your varnish developed a strange hue, even the river had become grey.

Every summer when you varnished a new set of instruments you would hang them in the garden to dry and bake in the sun. Lizzie always commented that it reminded her of being a little girl and putting all her dolls out on the grass. As the years went on, there was less and less sun though, until it was a hazy blob in the sky above the town. As the varnish dried it would become soot speckled.

You had to get away from it and had started to use the railways; to escape the dirt by riding the filthy smoke spewing contraptions that could take you to moors and open areas. It was astonishing how ten minutes on a locomotive could bring you to a place where the air was sweet again and there was heather and grass and colour all around. The valley of Hope, the empty barren moors, the crags, the trickling streams that somehow linked to the one running at the bottom of your garden. It would have been almost perfect had it not been for the faint rumbling and clanging from mines nearby. You could clear your head out there in the wasteland, surrounded only by grass and sheep.

Occasionally when you were walking you would bump into Dr Hunt. He always failed to see that you wished to be alone and would begin talking about the soundpost of his instrument or replacing the bridge. These meetings were awkward and you always had to make excuses to head in the opposite direction.

After Lizzie had died, you had almost abandoned violins and had gone walking every day. They were clear days, sometimes piercingly cold but the wind rushed through you, clearing away worries and confusion.

Again, you had the misfortune to spot the doctor from a distance. You kept your head down trying to veer away from him, hoping that it wasn't his shape and his familiar gait coming towards you at speed. As the man made his way down the side of the hillside in your direction, it was apparent there was no escape. You didn't want to talk and regretted the place was so devoid of trees, there was no way of avoiding him.

"Dr Hunt," you said to him, touching your hat.

He didn't say your name back, but shuffled towards you with a slightly menacing expression before launching into what was on his mind

"I was thinking; when I was a child, my father brought me to your workshop to buy a new violin. Do you remember?"

"Of course I do, it was a lovely little golden thing that had- "

"Yes, yes," he snapped, "I recall he told me that he came to you when he was a young chap too."

You have a suspicion where this is leading and think of likely answers to questions he will pose.

"Well, he must have been confusing me with my father," you suggest.

"No, I don't think so," Dr Hunt said sternly, "You see, my father was eighty when he died and he never made a mistake or mixed up faces or names. What's bothering me is that I'm now fifty, but somehow, you are still an old man. How is that possible?"

You throw your hands in the air.

“It’s not for me to speculate how people perceive time or how we age, you are the medical man Doctor.”

Dr Hunt grabs you by the lapels roughly and says, “How old are you?”

You stare back at him. You wished he was not so inquisitive but know that his theory, whatever it is, will be seen as so ridiculous by anyone in the medical profession that it will not be taken seriously. He continues to stare, but your gaze shifts from his eyes to the barrel of a shotgun peeking out of his coat.

As suddenly as he grabbed you he releases the grip and pats you down, almost like he had helped you from falling.

“I apologize. I am sorry,” he tells you brusquely, beads of sweat dripping down his forehead. You say nothing, he is clearly bothered by something and considering he is angry and armed, you do not ask.

You begin to walk again, the muddy path ahead stretches as far as you can see and you scan the horizon for somewhere you can turn off as he begins to talk again.

“One of the worst aspects of practising medicine is that if you have something wrong with yourself and it’s serious, you can’t break the news gently. You cannot pretend the diagnosis is wrong when it is staring you in the face. When you start finding blood in your handkerchief instead of soot, it isn’t good news; you don’t need to be a doctor to know this though.”

You say nothing, just nod at what he is saying, keeping an eye on the shotgun.

“Everyone would be angry if they find out they don’t have long to live. Most people don’t find this out though; they just feel a little unwell and don’t wake up one day, which I think I’d prefer if I had the choice.”

Dr Hunt stopped and stared out into the vast space ahead, before continuing.

“I like to come out here and kill things. It balances the scales somewhat.”

You glance at him and the gun in his hand.

“Rabbit, grouse,” he confirms before walking off in the direction he came from.

A chill comes across you and you contemplate returning to the silent empty house and warmth of the fire. Suddenly there is a loud bang and you turn to see Dr Hunt still pointing the gun in the air. A few seconds later the smoking body of a white speckled pigeon lands at your feet.

*

A while after William’s death, the incident almost erased from your mind, you answer the door one day and find his widow standing there. For a moment you are shocked. Did she know?

It is soon clear she has no idea what you did to her husband from her first sentence.

“Do you buy these?” she asks, holding a tatty viola in front of you. If this was anyone else you would turn them away, but something inside you, a long lost moral compass perhaps, makes you invite her in so you can see what she has to sell. Only when she is inside the house do you notice the state of her clothes; they are unwashed, grubby and fraying at the edges. You take the viola from her, it is a very cheap object, you are loathed to think of it as in instrument. It was probably removed from the wall of an alehouse as it has no strings and there is a thick layer of dust all over one side. You know her surname of course but out of politeness you say, “And where did this come from Miss..?”

“Sarah,” she says, adding, “Mrs. Well it was Mrs. My husband’s recently passed on.”

You look at her with pursed lips in acknowledgment.

“And Sarah is my surname,” she blurts out, “Well, it is my first name as well to be honest, funny eh?”

“Yes,” you tell her with a serious face. You are about to say something else when you notice the baby. She has a very small, very quiet baby strapped to her side the whole time. She sees you look at the child.

“He’s not called Sarah,” she points out, “No, he’s a boy, aren’t you Albert?”

You look at the child. The child that in a few decades you will chase into the canal and watch drowns in the black waters. You don’t ask about the father, but the sight of her, her plight touches you and you find yourself taking out money, more than twenty times the amount the viola is worth and placing it in her hand.

“I can give you this for the instrument, I hope that will be satisfactory,” you tell her.

You look at her gaunt face and you can almost smell the food she is dreaming of buying. She thanks you and leaves. You throw the violin on the fire. As it burns, you notice it is so cheap there aren’t even nails holding the neck onto the body.

You shake your head at the fact you have again encountered this family in connection with a violin. You watch the fire and recall William’s father, George Serrer with a smile.

In 1848, another wave of the Dutch came to town and with them, came new ways for George to lose money. He quickly dismisses cock fights and cards and almost overnight is obsessed with the game the Dutch have brought. George is one of those men who are instantly liked by all. He smiles and people smile back. He is an extrovert and talks openly to everyone about everything. All of this makes it easier for you to keep tabs on him but also more difficult in other respects as he is not, like some of his family, a hateable man. He is nineteen years old when you kill him.

His new skittle addiction means you always know where to find him. In one of a dozen basements, which hold regular games and lend money to those who want to play. The basements are mostly badly lit, damp and dirty; the only thing differentiating the spaces from those in derelict buildings is the nine lumps or hard polished Lignum Vitae and the clean square where they stand.

You find it fascinating being part of the crowd, you are within a group, yet at the same time, anonymous. All those present in the room, players and those who stand and watch the games, backs against the mouldy walls, share the common pleasure of observing skill.

Some of these people cannot speak English; there are travellers, foreign labourers who gesture and use their fingers to explain or show they understand the rules. There are wealthy mill owners following the fashion to ‘tour the slums’ incognito, in order to witness how their workers live. Sometimes there are even

women. Despite the thick Lancashire dialects, the French, the Dutch and Arabic spoken during these games, you can hear the common language of gambling. The Oh and Ah, the sigh and hiss of a something that nearly was or wasn't to be.

All the gazes are fixed on the nine pins, not each other.

"Owt or nowt?" asks one man collecting coins from people.

"Sarves him right," says another as the cheese rolls forward hitting just one skittle.

George steps out of the row of faces and begins his game.

He has been known to lose large amounts of money, but is not to be labelled a loser, for he has been known to win large amounts of money also. When he had money, he spent it as quickly as he'd won it. When he does win, it is always in circumstances that are out of the ordinary.

One winter, you watched him bet the entire room that out of the two men about to play, neither would win the game. Every man laughed, shook their heads and dug deep into their pockets, taking him up on the bet. Outside, a storm was raging and the men, reluctant to leave, took their time in playing. The atmosphere in the room was tense. After a few minutes, one of the players' children ran to their father, drenched and begging him to come home to help with an emergent situation. The man shook his head. Even though he had no money of his own involved in the game, he wanted to know how George could win or if this was some part of halting the play.

George shook his shoulders and then gazed out of the dirty arch basement window at the passing feet and cartwheels going by, as if no longer interested in the wager. The game continued and as it went on you began to like George and his reasoning. You slowly saw why he had made such a ridiculous wager.

You smiled and he saw you and smiled back. It was a quiet shared moment before the mayhem began. Seconds later, one of the window panes cracked and rainwater came flooding into the basement, in less than a minute, the skittles were washed on their sides and ‘game over’ was declared by the gaffer.

George’s free tongue means he has no problem telling you if he is married or has any children. He answers automatically and almost instantly forgets you have asked anything, so engrossed is he in the game.

Another evening, after seeing him lose several games, you find him stood next to you counting coins in his palm.

“Anything you won’t bet on?” you say.

“Me?” he asks, “nah, I’d fight me right hand against me left if thought it’d win,” he replies.

You both watch the game in progress, but you can tell he is itching to ask you for the details of your proposed wager. After a few seconds he speaks.

“Why, whatch got in mind?”

“Nothing specific, I was just commenting.”

“Bored of the game? Want something bigger and mightier to bet on?”

You nod.

“Howbout this then,” he says, leaning forward to whisper, “They say there’s a curse in my family.”

“Who says this?” you enquire.

“The family does. M’father died when I was born ‘n his father died when he wuz born too.”

“And his father?” you ask, wondering if he knows his family tree as well as you do.

“Dunno about that,” he says.

This is the first time you were made aware that the Seller family even saw the connection. You are pleased that after all this time someone knew about your hand in their fate.

“What’s the bet then?” you ask George.

“Neaw, I olez thought me that was a connection see? A baby gets born and a father dies. None of em’ liv’t see ‘child grow up see?”

You nod your head. He actually saw the connection too and did not just think it was coincidence.

“Coincidence?” you ask him.

“Another word for saying it’s summat to bet on, a pattern.”

You frown, “A pattern?”

“Aye, take them mayors. Their names wuz William, James, Alexander and William.”

He glances at your face of confusion.

“So, chances are, that in another two mayors coming, he’ll be called William.”

“That’s not a pattern. A pattern is something that occurs more than once.”

“Two Williams is more than once innit?” he tries to clarify. He looks intently at you and then gets back to the topic, “Me missus is having a baby.”

You visibly tense. You had to like George. For all his idiocy, he was a nice man.

“And what would the bet be?”

“Well, I gave it no mind all these years, but aw’ve just unbethought, the chances are I’ll be dead before the child’s gerring on for a year.

“And how is this a bet?” you ask.

“I bet you I pop me clogs before the year’s out.”

You rub your chin. Was this leading to some devious twist? A complex mathematical wager?

“How will you benefit from the wager if you are dead?”

“I’ll win.”

“But what would be the sense in winning if you are dead?”

“That’s the point of betting ain’t it, to win? It’s like my family motto.”

If anything, his family’s motto was Sine Rationale.

“What do you say then?”

For some reason you nod. Accumulative guilt somehow works its way into your head and you handshake on a preposterous amount of money before George is distracted and returns to the crowd to watch the game. Moments later, he has forgotten about the conversation and you don’t see him again for several days.

Another week, another basement, another game. In this basement, although bigger and brighter, there is a small trickling stream running directly through it. At first you think it’s an open sewer but you look at the water and can see it is clear spring water.

The drinkers spit it in, at one point, one man urinates in it. This stream, you think, possibly joins the river running at the bottom of your garden. It’s tiny and feeble while at the same time being unstoppable. Unstoppable to the extent that the buildings have been constructed over and around it. So tiny, yet a force to be reckoned with. You ponder this piece of nature as you wait to see if George will make an appearance. The room fills up and after half an hour, you hear his voice.

“Part the crowd please, gentlemen.”

As the men stand to either side of the room you see two small paper boats bobbing along the water. You look up. George and another man are staring intently, eyes bulging as their flimsy childish constructions head towards the hole in the far wall.

“Yes? Yes? Yes? Yes! YES!!!” George screams, holding his hand out to receive his winnings from the other man. At the last second, his winning boat turns and sinks. Georges’ opponents vessel sails over it and on into the hole and beyond into the unknown veins of the city.

Even though George has lost, no money changes hands. The other man pats him on the back with a smile and as you make your way over to them, you hear him tell him, “Can’t have you indigent now cannus?”

Chipped brown jugs of ale are brought downstairs and the two men celebrate. Half of you doesn’t want to know what they are celebrating but deep down you know what it is. From afar, you hear, “A toast to...”

“Whasa name?” the man asks.

“William!” George declares proudly as the men raise their glasses. At the back of your mind you wonder if George is somehow planning ahead with his preposterous monetary speculation and has named the child with a view to him becoming the mayor. This is not going to be easy you think. Here is a man with a short concentration span. He is easily bored but loves to gamble. You are one hundred and twenty nine years old and have to kill this man of nineteen. At home, you think, plan and scheme how you are going to carry this out.

You work and think. Think and work. You are angry. The soot and grime outside has killed the bees in your garden again. This has had a knock on effect on your violins. You mixed their propolis with alcohol; over a year, the dirt would sink to

the bottom and then with linseed oil you would create a beautiful seal for the instruments bodies. Your pale featureless creations would suddenly have character when they were varnished. Now the bees had died, the character in a bottle had died with them. This town had killed your violins. You empty the hives and all the rotting dead bees into the river before kicking the hives into the water too, the dirt sinking to the bottom. You would have to start afresh. Again. You are always starting things again. The cheap wooden boxes float away into the distance as you take out the list and plan George's future.

*

Jane Serrer woke her husband, who was sleeping in front of the fire and presented him with a piece of paper.

George lifted the cap off his face, looked at the paper and said, "Wassat?"

"It's a correspondence. An velope," she said to him.

"It's a letter," he corrected her.

"Whatever is it?" she asked, evidently worried.

"I dunno. Summat. What y'showing it me for? Go get Kathy, she'll translate it," George said and closed his eyes again.

"Who in heaven'd send us a letter?" Jane asked herself aloud. George remained silent. "Send *us* a letter?" she asked again, trying to make sense of things.

George remained silent.

"Who do we know who can write?" she muttered, "I mean to say, who in heaven'd send us a letter?"

George remained with his eyes closed but the third time Jane repeated the question he sat upright again.

“Will you stop clucking woman and go get Kathy!” he shouted, before watching her scurry off. He settled down with his eyes closed again. The letter was right in front of him on the arm of the chair and after a few seconds of weighing up odds and making his own personal bet with himself, his intrigue got the better of him and he picked it up to study the inky squiggles on the front. They looked a little like how he remembered the shape of his name to be, but he could not be sure. He opened it anyway. Inside there were tickets.

He recognised them and immediately recognized the theatre they were from, remembering the big signs that stood outside over its doors.

The two girls entered the living room and George put his hat over his head and said “It’s theatre tickets. Two of them.”

He listened to the semi whispered conversation.

“You said he couldn’t read,”

“He can’t, what is it?”

“It’s theatre tickets, two of them.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t read!”

“I can’t, it’s bloody obvious inn’t it?”

The room fell into a hush again as the reader looked at the squiggles and symbols and relayed the message.

“Sometimes they say they give tickets away as compliments and have chosen you……at random…er…to have these for nowt. It’s not a play, it’s an evening of magic, songs and…” the reader trailed off as she investigated the shapes.

“We’re not going, I’ll sell them,” George told his wife from under his hat.

“It’s tonight….there’s something called The Tumbling Fishermen-“

“We’re not going. I’ll stand outside and tout em’ both.”

“And there’s free beer too.”

George snatched the hat off his head and stared at his sister in law.

“What o’clock is it?” he asked.

“I’ll watch baby,” she said, “You sally on and enjoy yourself.”

Two hours later, George and his wife stood queuing outside the Theatre Royal. Around the, women in enormous gaudy hats munched nuts and men next to them smoked cigarette after cigarette as the queue shuffled towards the main doors in a haze of blue smoke.

Once inside, the stifling warmth of the building took Georges breath away. The atmosphere was oppressive, with hundreds of bobbing heads milling around in the semi darkness trying to find their seats. It was a situation of such gentle mayhem and confusion that a man could be murdered amidst the kerfuffle and leave no witnesses to positively say what had happened or who had committed the crime.

*

You watch Mr and Mrs Serrer grope their way along the aisle and find their seats as the hubbub of muttering falls and the lights go out. You are sitting above them in a box. You adjust your eyes to the darkness and smile. He has come, he has taken the bait.

The orchestra’s music grows louder and men with bellows drift down the aisles dispersing the enormous clouds of tobacco. It mingles with the sweat and the scent of lavender and people breathe semi fresh air again for a few moments before the show

begins. You take a swig of stale tasting water from your pigskin flask and settle down for the entertainment. The audience adjust their eyes to the dimness of the hall and are each lost in their own moment, the face of their loved one, an item lost in their handbag, their snuff tin or staring at the excitement of the empty stage.

You look at the Serrer couple and then back to the orchestra pit where you are distracted briefly, wondering if any of the violins being played are yours. You notice one particular instrument with a particular thick purfling that resembles your handiwork. You had used wood from the pear tree in your garden and had made it wider than normal. Not to make it look pretty, but to stop the wood on the body cracking. You close your eyes and try and hear its character through the swirl of the other instruments. The cluster of strings is like listening to a crowd. You hear individual voices; wolfy tones, harsh and bright sweeps, rich moans, nasal, shrill, sweet, raw, sonorous, dark, flutey, pure and resonant. Yes, you think, that is one of your little creations.

Your attention turns back to the other crowd, the one made up of faces. Jane smiles as the comedians' mess around; slipping and bumping into the scenery, pulling members of the audience up onto the stage and making fools of them too. George nips away from his seat several times and takes advantage of the free porter, which you have paid for. While drinking, he misses the tumbling child acrobats and magicians producing magpies from a box no bigger than an apple. He returns to his seat as a troupe of singers are winding up their act and The Great Cleveland and assistant are wheeling apparatus on stage. Even though The Great Cleveland is not particularly famous, his mere presence convinces the audience he is indeed as 'great' as his title claims.

Before he has begun his first trick, the young mute girls in the aisles selling mussels and whelks from trays find themselves standing alone and without customers for the first time that evening.

You study George's fascination as the escapologist is nailed inside a box and appears suspended on a wire seconds later. He cocks his head to one side like a dog does when confused. George seems lost in the moment, mouth open like a child, completely unaware of anything other than what is happening on stage.

You know that previously the couple have only ever been to fleapit theatres and bawdy singaround shows. Even though they have scrubbed up and worn their best clothes for the evening, their poverty shines through when sat amongst the elegance of the rest of the men and women in the theatre. This is why you chose this particular place. You know you can never lose sight of them.

Even if they are silent, their actions, mannerisms and body language single them out as poor people. They are both leaning forward in their seats. Performances like this are commonplace and although the crowd is entertained, they have seen similar things before, but for the Serrers, this is the most astonishing and magical evening of their lives.

Next, Cleveland is immersed upside down in a barrel of water and as the barrel is smashed open, he rolls onto the stage, bone dry. Again, you notice that George is deep in concentration. Your gaze remains fixed on George and his reaction to the act.

"For my next trick I would like a member of the audience to join me on stage," Cleveland booms. There is a little shuffling and Cleveland's assistant brings a young man well-dressed man out of the darkness to join the performer. The man's hair is

slicked back and shiny, he has a bright yellow silk handkerchief in jacket pocket and almost looks he could be a magician himself.

“This is a set of shackles. Slave shackles which I acquired during my recent tour of the Americas.”

He throws the iron chains to the man, who catches them with a dramatic lunge.

“You will note my friend that there are no locks present. No locks which I could possibly pick or interfere with in order to free myself. They are going to be kept closed by *force*,” he shouts, yanking a velvet cloth in the air and revealing a blacksmiths anvil and hammer.

“These shackles will be wrapped tightly on my legs and you will seal them yourself with these two nails.”

Cleveland then proceeds to regurgitate two shiny nails, one by one and wipe them on a white silk handkerchief, before passing them to the well-dressed man while his assistant watches.

The audience is silent as the shackles are placed on Cleveland’s legs, the nails inserted, hammered, bent in two and hammered again and again until they are both deformed and flattened around the clasps.

“…making it impossible for me to escape, do you not agree?” Cleveland shouts to the sea of faces. The audience roars its reply enthusiastically.

Next, his arms are tied behind his back and a cloth sack produced. Cleveland kneels to have the sack placed over his head and then shouts, “Wait.”

Silence envelops the hall. The only sound that can be heard is the gentle roaring of the gas lights.

“Before we begin, would my new friend here like to have a wager with me?”

Cleveland glances at the young well-dressed gentleman.

“You have seen with your own eyes how unfeasible it will be for me to escape these leg irons, have you not?”

The man nods.

“I’m positive you will agree that it will be impossible for me to navigate my way out of these metallic prisons on my body. Therefore, I would like to propose a small wager before I am bound in this here sack. How much money do you have on your person?” he asks.

The young man now appears to have been chosen from the audience for a reason. You conclude that this is a bet which Cleveland will definitely win. One he is making appear to be a flippant afterthought. George and this man were very similar people.

The volunteer produces a crisp bank note, some of the audience gasp and Cleveland nods.

“I will quadruple this sum if I cannot escape in sixty seconds.”

The man nods, still not realizing he has walked into a sure-fire loss situation. Cleveland pauses for dramatic effect and then says, “Begin.”

On this cue, the assistant stands directly in front of the performer, obscuring the audiences view as he violently throws the bag over the performers head and body, pulls the sacking to the floor and stands firmly on the opening to keep it fixed to the ground.

The audience watches the back of the assistant as he keeps the sacking taut. A sea of voices count drunken and sloppily as the sack jostles. The counting quietens around the number ten and there are few ‘eleventeen’ and ‘twelveteen’s from the less educated members of the crowd.

Over the shoulder of the assistant, the well-dressed man watches intently, supervising and checking for foul play.

Upon thirty, the assistant lets go of the sack and it falls to the ground empty. There is a gasp, followed by another gasp as the assistant turns to face the audience. It is none other than Cleveland; standing still, arms outstretched to catch the astonishment which is being hurled at him.

Cleveland, standing there with no chains on his legs. It defies belief. The well-dressed man drops the bank note in shock and stands with his mouth open.

Thunderous applause breaks out in the theatre and Cleveland bows, picking up and pocketing the money before he stands up straight again, face filled with a devious smile. You glance again at George. He too has that same devious smile, you can almost see his mind working things out.

*

Once the seed has been planted, George needed little encouragement. Several days later, the old man overheard him talking of the escapologist with a mixture of awe and contempt.

“He can’t have really been in those chains if he got out of em so fast,” he argued.

“How’d he get out of em’ then?” his friend asked.

George shook his head. Even though he didn’t know the answer, he had had an epiphany. This was where he knew money could be made. If it was possible to do it, while seeming completely impossible, then he could do a similar thing. George being George, however, the details hadn’t been fully planned out. His mind flicked

between learning how to do a similar trick and actually believing it could be done. Maybe it wasn't a trick. He had seen it with his own eyes. Maybe it could be done. Maybe there was a secret to getting out of that situation and only a few people on the planet knew this mystery. That night as the merrily drunk George left the skittle hall, an old man approached him.

"I heard you mention the Great Cleveland," he said as he walked alongside.

"I too am interested in knowing how the trick was carried out. In fact, I bought some shackles from the flat iron market yesterday and want to make you a proposal."

George said nothing. His silence was confirmation of his interest.

"Follow me," the old man said, leading him down an alley and up a staircase.

"There are some secrets in this world that remain secret for many hundreds of years," he said as they made their way up the flights of stairs.

"I'm not referring to magic tricks. I mean real secrets. Ask the next three thousand people you meet if they know of a liquid that burns and they will tell you there is no such thing. Yet hundreds of years ago, the Romans used such a liquid in battle. A liquid that could be squirted on the enemy. A liquid of flames and heat that would roast a man alive. People called it Greek fire in fact because the Greeks knew about it even before the Romans did. A liquid, just like water, which burns violently. Liquid fire. It will kill anyone who is covered in it."

George listened intently as the old man explained the mystery.

"I am a luthier. I make violins. Little, shiny, wooden boxes. I also make the varnish. I am not an alchemist, but I use hundreds of ingredients from all over the world; colours from African stones, sap from American trees, crushed insects, peppercorn, lavender, saffron, naphtha. I know of a flammable, dangerous liquid that exists. I am not in command of an army though and it remains a secret."

The old man fumbled and lit a match and then a candle, illuminating the dark staircase.

“What is a secret? What is the impossible? Just ten years ago this very friction stick would have been said to be impossible, but here we are now, witness to the seemingly ‘impossible’ creation of ‘instant fire’. So, you may very well ask three thousand people about the validity of this ‘fire water’ and be told it is a myth, but if you ask a thousand and one people. You will be told it is a *fact*. I even have some in a bottle on a shelf in my workshop.”

They reached the top of the stairs and the old man looked at George, eyes wide open, aching to know what the secret proposal was.

“I can see you are eager to know about the matter at hand. I’m unsure how we should do this. I am no showman, but perhaps I could be the foil in this arrangement, the elderly gent who pretends he cannot get out of the trap.”

The old man unlocked a door at the end of the stairs and led George onto a flat rooftop. It was empty apart from a large coil of chain and a pair of leg shackles next to a small brown key.

“Or maybe we could arrange for it to happen the other way round. I will wager that no man can escape these lockable irons and after a few people attempt it and fail, only when it seems impossible, then we can punt a chance and take bets and *you* can come forward.”

The old man walked over to the metal bracelets and gestured George to try them on for size. With thoughts of money in his mind, George needed no encouragement and clamped both of the locks shut around his ankles.

“Yes, they look very good on you,” the old man said with admiration before turning away and looking into the murky distance. He surveyed the dirty rooftops in

front of him; clouds of smoke and chimneys; a blurry mess of construction of sooty haze. The blanket of buildings was broken only by the slashes of railway track between them. From here, it was as if nobody lived in Manchester. The only movement to be seen was the faint crawling of train engines as they slowed to a halt in the depot, which ran level with the rooftop. The only thing separating the tracks from George and the old man was a narrow chasm, which held the trickling tar-like liquid of the river, dividing the building and the ferocious power of the steam engines. The old man looked down at the river and its thick, greasy movements.

"I'm not sure if these were from a slave or a guard dog," he said to George, "they seem small for a man's legs. Perhaps they were for a child," he commented as George struggled with the locks, grinning and wriggling as he tried to get out of the restraints. He reached for the key and put it into the lock to release one of his legs.

After twisting and fiddling with the key a few times he lost his balance and sat cross legged on the coil of chain, turning the key again.

The old man watched and softly said, "*Sure as night follows day, all this ends the same same way*. Have you heard this before?"

George shook his head, although it did seem familiar to him.

"Is there a trick to open these?" he asked the old man.

Before the old man could answer, a rhythmical clacking sound began.

Tat

Tat

Tat

Tat

The noise was similar to that of the nearby trains, but closer. A smirk fell of George's face as he felt a sensation on the seat of his trousers. He could feel the

sound. He stood up and saw the coil of chain slowly moving, like a strange metal snake.

Tat tat

Tat tat

Tat tat

Tat tat

He looked down at the chain coil. It was unravelling. His eyes followed the circle of chain as it snaked along the rooftop and disappeared over the side of the building.

“It’s something that a relative of yours used to say,” the old man muttered, ignoring George’s concern.

The foot high coil of chain became a little smaller and George darted along its path to see where it was disappearing to. At the edge of the building he saw that it dangled over the abyss and led to the railway arches and onto the railway lines. He turned around as if to get an explanation but only saw the shoulders of the old man as he descended the stairs.

All this ends the same same way?

The clacking sound speeded up slightly and he frantically looked back over the edge of the building and felt his stomach churn as it dawned on him that he was attached to a slow moving locomotive, which was a stone’s throw away, but creeping along the tracks away from the rooftop he was standing on.

Tat tat tat

Tat tat tat

Tat tat tat

Tat tat tat

He knelt down and tried the key again and then dropped it. His mind, unconcerned with why this had happened, splintered his thoughts into a series of possible escape plans.

He looked at the key and accepted that this would probably never open the locks. He would have to escape another way. Cleveland had done it, it was possible.

Tat tat tat tat

Tat tat tat tat

Tat tat tat tat

Tat tat tat tat

Next, he looked around for a pole, a column, something he could wrap himself and the chain around which would take the force and break the chain when the coil ran out. This was a flat and featureless roof top though. There was nothing to wrap the chain around.

Tat tat tat tat tat tat tat tat tat

Tat tat tat tat tat tat tat tat tat

The sound speeded up, the train was moving faster. George wondered if he could hold on to something, wedge himself somewhere

Tatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatatat

How would he break his own ankles? Right now, it was the only way he could think of to get out of the manacles. The hiss and whistle of a different train drowned out the sound of the chain for a moment as George desperately looked around for more ways he could get out of the situation. Even if he had a saw there would be no time to saw off his feet. He peered down at the chasm, the river and the ten-foot gap between him and the railway lines. Could he jump this distance? And if he could, would he be able to reach the accelerating train in time? It was still moving at walking

pace after all. If he fell into the chasm, he wouldn't fall far, he was attached to the chain. The frenzy of ideas ended when the coil reached its final layer and George was pulled legs first, violently towards the edge of the building. He hit the low wall with some force, knocking him unconscious and as the train picked up speed, he was pulled onto the tracks, his body bouncing along the sleepers as the train chugged onwards out of Manchester.

You look up from the street and see George's body jerk off the roof and disappear on the railway and out of sight. You wonder what the engineers and stationmasters will find upon the trains arrival in Leeds. A battered ball of ripped material and blood? A pair of feet?

You feel a raindrop on your face and make your way home. You remember your father's insight and wise words. His attention to the big picture, the long game. How he advised you to become a luthier and shun farming. How he told you never to let anyone get away without paying you what they owed. And then you recall your arrangement with George. It amuses you that you actually owe him money because you killed him. You will honour this debt though. Your have to. When you get home, you take out the list and write George's name on the list below his four relatives; George Serrer 1830 – 1848 and make arrangements for his winnings to be delivered to his wife and new born son. Little William Sarah.

And the train ploughs into the night, tracks running parallel to the canal and river. And the rain falls. And the river tastes the water which trickles down the mossy brickwork, down its rusty banks to join the flow. It remembers flavour of the green grass and the earthy tang of the changing crops. The sensation of the powdered oyster shell fertilizer carried downhill and washed into it. The feeling of a gentle hoof stepping in its shallow waters. Of eel gracefully mimicking its currents. It recalls looking up at the sight of the robin and blackbird's feet in winter as they daintily hop on the iced-over surface. The river remembers the laughing and muffled conversations of the farmhands and resting crofters cooling their feet and sitting in the sun. But the crofters have gone, and the crofts themselves remain frozen as words on maps; Nicholas Croft, Walker's Croft, Parsonage Croft. And the river's progress ever forward is picked at by the persistent gnat-like men who try and channel it, block it, redirect it and utilise its power. One man's mill reservoir is another mans dried up water source. The Tib. The sad river Tib with a street named after it, a street running along its path, now a dry path. The words on the map are like gravestones to the river.

III

Dear Baby, 1830 is a significant year for us both. It is both the year George was born and the year in which railways began, for George it was also the cause of his death. For me, it was the start of decades of noise, dirt and a swelling Hunt's Bank, later Victoria station slowly taking over my land and creeping closer to my home. Furthermore, it was also the same year in which another of your ancestors met their end.

I know this is all confusing for you to understand. I am trying to explain, but fear I am doing it badly. The point I am trying to reach was before the deaths of James, Albert, William and George.

Although I have outlived these distant relatives of yours, there was always a strange lull in my world. A time in-between the killing where I would wait and wait. A period of inactivity. Several decades, in which I would mull over everything and nothing and watch the town around me change, grow wilder like a garden which has been neglected.

I tried to remember when I'd first noticed the calm before the storm of change, but thoughts of the past only led me to thoughts of the present and death. For death reminded me of my own age. I was one hundred and eleven years old and still

thought little of this feat of life. This is the curse of mankind; never appreciating the things we have.

A few years before this, there had been a local woman named Katherine Prescott, who had died at one hundred and eight years. Few believed she was this age, that it was even possible to live to such an age. I was two years older than her though. I knew it was possible. My heart beat over and over in this body of mine and the reflection in the looking glass showed me a man who appeared only seventy. My eyes were not sunken and hollow; my skin was not wrinkled or sagging.

I was not presumptuous in assuming I was alone in nature. If I was this age and keeping it quiet, wasn't it possible there were others like me, older than me, out there in the world? People who had no aspiration to be part of a medical freak show? People living in undiscovered corners of the world who did not even count time in years? I know that years are a modern way of recording events and time. I have read that the Romans measured time by the number of councils that had passed in a person's life, not by three hundred and sixty five days passing as we do today.

Although I did think a lot about time as the years went by, it was something I knew was futile as its passing was inevitable. My own death would come one day I told myself. Until then, I waited, like fungus spores; waiting until the circumstances were just right. The temperature, the situation, waiting for the day when my purpose in life had been achieved.

Royalty and Prime Ministers came and went, wars were fought, allies became enemies and then allies again. Time and age made little sense when I thought about it.

We are all time travellers of sorts. We travel forward. Some of us do it better than others. Each time I read of someone in a faraway place living to be one hundred and fifteen, I smiled. It made me happy there were these people out there, for the older I got, the lonelier I got. There were less and less people who could understand.

Life is strange sometimes. Stanger than making a living gluing pieces of wood together to make expensive boxes. Stranger than a hall full of people sat listening to men gliding taught strands of horse hair over pieces of gut, in order to appreciate the way they resonate. Stranger than a small village turning into a filthy slum in the blink of an eye.

The strangeness of life is that fate seems to be mapped out, not just by the decisions you make, but by those other people you have never even met have made for you. You are born and at first your parents make these decisions. The key to my longevity, I believe, is the purity of the food I ate and I thank my father for this. For never forcing cooked food down me as an infant, but as a decision it was not something I consciously made. I ate raw onions, fresh milk and uncooked fish because they were the only things, for whatever reason, which my body desired.

We move forward and forward in time and seem to forget that what has happened will carry on in the generations who live in the aftermath of those decisions. My father lives on in the words he said to me. Never let anyone get away without giving you what they owe. It doesn't sound as good when said in English. This seemed to be the thing driving me forward all these years.

I look back now and see change. There were a lot of things, all unconnected at a first glance, all happening at once. Change in coffeehouses; sober men drinking a strange new fashionable drink, laws were changing, factory workers with free time on their hands. And as every government knows, time leads to thought and thought leads to reflection and revolt.

Sober men drinking a mind clearing, thought focusing beverage instead of being in a sleepy alcoholic muddle, coupled with angry workers was a dangerous mixture. A mixture leading to riots and fire and the resentment of an unhappy society.

Even though all this was hundreds of years before you were born, baby, this is how you came to be born in 1995. These fragmentary moments of the past all formed you, in some way or another. My actions caused you to be born at that particular time, in this particular year. The chain effect of things I did to your ancestors because of offhand remarks shaped you.

All the things you will take for granted; power at the flick of a switch, medicine, human rights, votes for all, equality laws, aeroplanes, cars, telephones. The unprecedented

change at a speed never seen before in history surely hasn't ceased now in 1995. It has only just begun. In another hundred years people may very well look back at the telephone and aeroplane as forgotten things, historical footnotes and archaic inventions, as you will view telegraphs, gas lights, fax machines or the horse and cart. You can never be settled in your own present. It isn't stationary. It's as if you are stood in a river; you may be still, but all around you it is flowing.

*

Thomas Seller owed a lot of money. There are some things in life that are preprogramed. Take a cat that has never seen a fish before and place a tank of fish in front of it. Within seconds, its nose will be against the glass, its paw poised, ready to catch one. So it was with Thomas Seller and indeed, his entire family. They somehow managed, against all odds, to pass on their addiction. He is a name amongst others on a list; *Thomas Seller 1793-1830*.

As a child, Thomas had played under Ducie Bridge near the burial ground. He learned to swim across the river, practising on his own, and then one day, casually remarked, that you'd have to be a strong swimmer to get across the bottleneck current. His friends disagreed stood looking at the other side for over an hour. The next day, fifteen children had managed to scrape together all the money they had and deposited it in a cap on the far bank, crossing the bridge again, stripping to their shorts and fighting across the water to the other side. The first to the bank won the hat of riches.

Thomas Seller's life of gambling began on that day. With his winnings, he bought a cart and a few trays of watercress and at the age of nine, began his career as a market trader. A year of selling watercress saw him branch out into hot rolls. Each day, before the market opened, he played marbles. After a particularly good winning streak one year, he acquired a second cart, five crates of leather dog collars and a box of cigars. Two decades later, he had expanded the business, hired people to run his market stalls and was heavily in debt due to his discovery of horseracing. He divided his time between Kersal Moor racetrack and drowning his sorrows in the Rover's Return over an ale and a plate of stilton.

In an effort to settle his debts, he had doubled them and sat trying to figure out how to pay them, his staff's wages and the beer and plate of cheese in front of him, in that order.

The answer, he told himself had to be staring him right in the face. That was where the answer always was. He thought back to the first time he'd won anything. He needed something like that to happen again. A way of taking people's money from them without having to do much in return.

He looked around the bar for inspiration. He saw the barrels, empty crates, musty old cloths and a newspaper.

He rubbed his beard and reached for The Chronicle. This was a document with hundreds of answers to all sorts of questions. He just had to find the answer to his particular problem.

The columns of railway shares made no sense to him. There were auctions advertised for wine collections, freehold farms for sale, porters wanted, hatters wanted, potions to dye grey whiskers, grouse shooting weeks, life assurance and one-way tickets to sail to New Zealand or Cape Town. None of these sparked any

ideas in his mind as to how he was going to make it through the next few days, although he kept the one-way tickets and life assurance in mind, in case things got sticky.

A young boy wearing shorts and only one shoe scampered into the pub.

“Mr Seller?” he said timidly.

Thomas sighed, who else did he owe money to?

It was much worse than that though.

“Mr Seller, Mrs Seller has just given birth sir, she sent me to come and fetch you.”

He waved his hand to the child and sent him away. Now his day was complete. Now the cherry had truly been placed on the cake. He stood up and stretched, making it look as if he were going to sit down again in a moment. He took another nibble of the stilton, flicked one of the maggots to the side and wondered why he had ordered this delicacy, with the full knowledge he didn’t have anywhere near enough money to pay for it. The bar tender pottered down the wooden steps into the cellar for something and Thomas took this as his cue to sneak out of the pub.

Outside he stood on the stone sets and soaked in the afternoon sunlight. He stepped forward onto Shudehill and weaved his way through the rows of hen and pigeon cages, feathers being sent in every direction in the breeze. What else could he do with no money? It was almost like a challenge to him now. Having no money was like having lots of it. He felt his beard. He considered getting a shave. After all, once his beard was removed, the barber couldn’t exactly put it back upon the revelation he was penniless.

He was about to head to the barbers when another young child, fully shoed, came up to him, “Sir, I’ve been sent to-“

“Yes, I know, go away, tell her I’m coming.”

The young boy lifted his cap and rubbed his mucky face.

“Her sir? It’s a he sir, that sent me, sir.”

Thomas looked down at the grubby child.

“What riddles y’talking to me?”

“Sir, I haven’t to miss, give you this, sir.”

He looked at the child and the little rectangle he was holding out.

He was about to ask what it was but knew the child wouldn’t be able to read and snatched the card off him and walked on into the bird market.

It was the card of a moneylender. A smooth and expensive looking business card, now with a child’s filthy thumb print in one corner.

How did these vultures even know who he was, let alone where he was? What supernatural powers did these sharks possess to know that he owed money and would consider borrowing it? He studied the card, which read *“Discretion guaranteed*”, before wondering what kind of security these hyenas would need to obtain any money.

“Favourable rates,” the card told him.

The address was less than two hundred paces from Shudehill so he set off walking. He didn’t have to make a decision immediately; he would think it over in the next few minutes.

He passed the booksellers and meandered through Hyde’s Cross and turned onto Toad Lane and Long Millgate, crushing several snails underfoot as he went. He knew the area quite well but didn’t know of any men of finance operating in any of the streets. Not that these places could really be called streets as such. The cobbles ceased, the sets and kerbs gave way to a network of dirt tracks. He walked in the

middle of the pathway, avoiding the muddy grooves of the cart tracks. Next came a ginnel and a flight of steps, leading to a row of old cottages. The muddy pathway was covered in dirty wooden planks. He looked up for house names and numbers and saw nothing other than the engraved dates the buildings were erected; JE 1607. AY 1594. He looked for numbers on doors, but found none of the houses had them. The wide street he remembered from childhood, was now little more than an alley way, due to the number of wide buildings which had been erected. The structures had eaten up the road, reducing it to a narrow brick passageway. What were once the front entrances of the weaver's cottages were now just bricked up doorways and long since boarded up panoramic windows. The only openings on the narrow route were a few coal chutes and a tiny square hatch with a metal handle, which resembled a safe door at chest height in the wall.

Thomas looked around and was about to walk away, when the hatch was pushed open from the inside and a voice called to him.

"How much are you interested in loaning Mr. Seller?"

All the questions he had planned on asking, evaporated. He didn't care who this person was, how he knew his name or where to find him. If this person wasn't going to mention security or payment terms then neither would he. If the worst happened, and he couldn't pay it back, what could this mystery person possibly do? You can't take money off someone if they don't have any, he told himself, and why would you kill someone who owes money. It would never be paid back if that happened.

"Er, six hundred," he said with the slight lilt of a question clinging to his words.

The voice didn't reply.

"Is that possible?" Thomas asked.

“Yes, that is not a problem. The money will be available in a moment. Can you please return my card?” the voice asked.

Thomas looked around the alley. At the back of his mind he suddenly felt slightly unsettled about this encounter. He looked around again, at the business card and into the opening.

The next few seconds seemed to happen in slow motion. His mind processed the five second event, but was unable to construct any sense out of the facts in time to do anything.

As he reached into the hole to pass the card back, he caught a glimpse of the room inside. It didn’t look like a bank or an office. He saw some violins hanging from the far wall and noticed a strange pungent odour before feeling someone grab his hand and a cold wet sensation washed across his arm.

He managed to blurt out, “What is that?” before finding himself staggering backwards with a soaking arm and crashing into the wall behind.

As the hatch closed he heard a voice say, “Naphtha,” before he saw the flames rise to his chest and then to his beard and hair, blinding him in the process. He was perplexingly calm as he accepted the truth that he was on fire. The liquid, although burning, continued to run down his arm and body as he wafted it in a pathetic effort to put it out. The pain he expected to feel was more piercing bubbling than real pain. It remained a constant bubbling sensation as his clothes heated up and began to stick to his flesh.

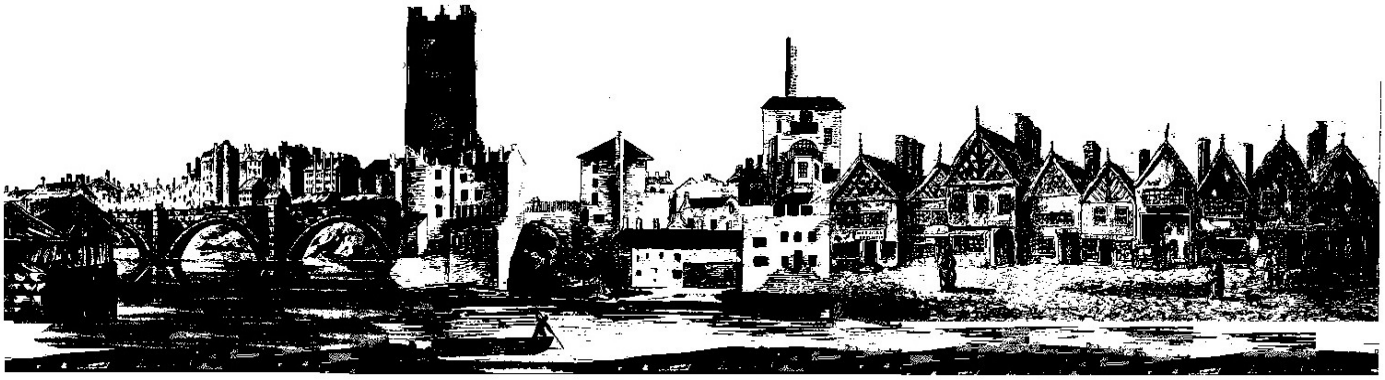
A single thought then exploded in his head. The river.

The river was within reach, he thought. The river will save me, water will extinguish the blaze. Have to get to the river. The river he swam in as a child, fished in as a young boy and pissed in as an adult.

He'd been on fire less than ten seconds and now had this piece of hope to cling to, but there were several obstacles in the way of Seller's moment of optimism. Had this been 1800 and not 1830, the river would indeed have been a few steps away. Had it been 1800, he could have made two or three blind lurches in the general direction and fallen into the water. This was 1830 however, and in thirty years dozens of houses and buildings had been built in-between Seller and the cool water. Arches and railway tracks had mushroomed, forming ten thousand ton obstacles. He would have to circumnavigate several alleyways, hastily constructed porches and extensions, gates, pigsties, cinder pits, fences, steps and passages to get anywhere close to the riverside.

But this was all immaterial anyway. The highly flammable liquid he was doused with would have laughed at the waters attempts to extinguish it. Its heat wouldn't be satisfied until it had destroyed his clothes, sizzled through his hair and skin, roasted his muscle, fat and meat and left what was once Thomas Seller as an unrecognizable pile of dried blood and charred offal.

As he smouldered away in the alley, on the other side of the wall, the old man jotted his name down on a list and prepared to brick up the hole in his workshop wall. Thomas Seller 1793 – 1830. He glanced at the next name on the list, Thomas's father, his life encapsulated in a mere brief statement; John Seller 1764 – 1793. That was what the sum total of his life, two words and some numbers.



Two men appeared out of the crowd, one fuelled by adrenaline, jumping up and down and opening and closing his hands frantically. The other man, who was much bigger, stood composed and relaxed. The hubbub quietened until there was silence. The man in the cap quickly mumbled something about rules, but both men waved him on, they knew the only rules were to get up in thirty seconds and even this rule was ignored sometimes.

The mumbler stepped back and the two men raised their fists. Frantic-boy was burning energy like it were limitless; dancing on the spot, bobbing and ducking, throwing pointless fake punches as the crowd shouted.

The other man, nearly twice the size of his opponent, simply stepped forward, back and to the side casually to dodge the clumsy moves.

The people at the back of the crowd saw only one man's head and the fleeting chance blows of frantic-boy as they lashed out into the air. They could smell the sweat of the smaller fighter, who had to keep wiping it from his forehead as he ducked back to avoid blows.

This carried on for twenty-five minutes, by which point the crowds enthusiasm had waned, some people had sloped back to the bar to drink. This was the first of two fights that afternoon and they would return for the second one. The cellar now offered the fighters more space and the big man took full advantage of this. He lashed out at

the other fighter's face so fast, that all the crowd witnessed were grunts and a splatters of blood. Supporters of frantic-boy now called his name.

"Come on Sean, bring him down, Sean."

Chits of paper were exchanged. Money was passed to and from grubby hands into leather purses and odds changed for a third and fourth and fifth time.

The other man, still completely unscathed, hit Sean several times in quick succession and left him lying in the dirt of the cellar floor.

The crowd fell silent as the mumbler counted to thirty.

"Fteen, Sdeen, Seneen," he looked at Sean, "twenny."

Sean got back up, wobbling on his feet, and prepared to dodge more blows.

The next ten minutes were painful to watch. Sean was repeatedly knocked down and somehow managed to get up again each time. The crowd looked away as wet soft splats rang out in the cellar room. The cries for Sean changed in their tone. They weren't crying out for him, they were crying out in anger at the money they were about to lose and some protesting against the bloodbath.

The mumbler tried to shout, "Stop," several times but the big man continued fighting with one arm, while holding the mumbler back with the other.

It had been clear from the outset that these two men were mismatched.

The big man continued punching Sean until his eyes had swelled up to puffy slits.

"Over, it's over, he can't see!" the mumbler shouted, trying to wedge himself in-between the two men.

The big man shook his head, "I'll close my eyes then," he said, and promptly did so, listening for the sound of panicking shuffles and still landing punches on Sean's body with accuracy.

The crowd had turned now. This had stopped being a fair fight an hour ago, but the big man continued to lay blows on Sean.

The mumbler stopped trying to intervene; he let the charade play out to the end.

After nearly two hours, Sean was unable to get back up. He lay on the floor panting deeply, drooling, unable to see and with huge lumps appearing all over his body.

The remaining crowd began to look around the room with sheepish expressions. The big man, with barely a scratch or mark on his body and still with his eyes shut, leant against the doorway said, “Next.”

The mumbler sighed and looked at the faces in the room. Rather than congratulate the winner he said, “I’m sorry Sean,” while two men lifted him up and moved him upstairs. As they got closer to the door, the big man spat in his face and landed a final punch, which knocked Sean unconscious.

“No one beats me,” he grunted.

Upstairs, the drinkers saw Sean’s exit and returned to the cellar. There were new faces, some of them women. The cluster of people separated and made way for fresh fighters.

The new man was a similar height and weight as Sean but had a more noble and professional demeanour. He held out his hand for the big man to shake. It was rejected. The big man just looked at his new opponent with a cold, dead stare.

Mumbler grabbed both fighters and spoke, as if trying to delay the punishment.

“Fore we begin, can yez state your name and essentials?”

The new fighter said, “Graham Mcreigan, six foot, tweny tree, nun, tree.”

The crowd looked over the new fighter and quickly imagined his twenty three winning fights and no draws with ease and then tried to visualize how bloody the three losing battles must have been."

Big man stepped up and said with arrogance, "Six foot, fifty seven."

Even though most of the crowd knew he was undefeated for fifty seven fights, they still gasped dramatically.

"And yer name fella?" said one of the crowd.

"My name is John Seller."

*

Dear Baby, I have got this far and must tell you everything now. You may think of your ancestors and imagine that despite being poor gamblers, they were all decent and respectable people, however every family tree has a rotten branch and I can say with certainty that John Seller was the nastiest man I have ever come across. In fact, as I watched him grow up, I relished the day he would have a baby boy so that I could rid the world of the evil that he brought to it.

As a child, he was already twice the size of the children his age and he threw his weight and power around, lashing out at anyone who got in his way. He never appeared to have any friends, only children who feared him. Before he was ten I had witnessed him hitting his mother, smaller children and animals that got in his way or annoyed him.

In some ways, he was the opposite of myself as a child. Whereas I was weak, feeble and shy, he was loud and strong, forcing himself on everyone to get what he wanted.

As the years went on, this uneducated, hulking boy became an uneducated hulking man. Six foot tall and with a pair of dead eyes that feared nothing. Needless to say, he gambled. Dog fights, cock fights, street fights. He needed little encouragement to fight himself. It combined the two things he enjoyed the most; money and hurting people.

Due to his size he was involved in a lot of bare knuckle fighting and by the time he was twenty, had been encouraged to fight for money, first in the street and then at organized events. There were always people eager to invest in him and stage a fight. They cared little if he won or lost, they would make money either way. It didn't matter if you referred to it as Prize Fighting or Pugilism, John Seller didn't know how to spell either of them. His job was simple; he walked up, beat someone to a pulp and got paid for it. I had the distinct feeling that he wasn't happy unless he was hurting someone and he always was.

At this point it became difficult for me to view first hand John's progress in life. Some of the fights took place in drinking houses, which were shut off to outsiders and I simply could not enter them. Other fights took place secretly, in the middle of the night in closed theatres or abattoirs. I heard the stories afterwards though. These tales always made it onto

the streets and I wondered how much embellishment had been added to them as they were passed on to other people.

Did John Seller really break his arm mid-fight and continue beating his opponent with one fist? Had he really kicked another man to death for being knocked off balance?

After a while, John had won dozens of fights and lost none. The public who spoke of him changed their opinion. They no longer wanted this local legend to win; they wanted to see him lose. They bet on his opponents regardless of their size or chances of winning. They just wanted someone to beat the man and this always resulted in money being made.

It was custom in many of the alehouse fights for the winner to donate some of his winnings to a charitable cause; the ragged school or the wounded soldiers who fought in Gibraltar. Failing this, many winners would buy everyone a drink out of their earnings. Seller never gave any of his money away. He basked in the glory of his victory and was often the cause of further fights during these moments. Before the fight, there was usually an investor or promoter around him to ensure he didn't do anything foolish. He had been known to fight people before the fight.

"Try y'luck?" he would say, clipping one of the drinkers with his fist.

"Bout you eh?" he would quip slapping another in the face.

But the book keepers made money and the ale houses saw their profits soar when he fought, so people turned a blind eye to any damage he caused before or afterwards.

Seller's record for never losing fights annoyed other pugilists and people would travel from across the country specifically to challenge him. There were plenty of amateurs keen to beat him; huge burly pitmen, coal porters, professional gypsy fighters who would usually only fight people they knew they could beat. Then there were the poor Irish labourers who saw the opportunity as a chance to make a hundred guineas and thought nothing of the beating they would sustain in the one sided battle. Like any gambler, they knew there was still a chance they could beat him, so they tried.

I had thought about this though. Youth and strength may win most of the time, but arrogance and self-assurance was an illusion. I knew that Seller wouldn't stay young and strong forever. Unlike myself, Seller was ageing at a normal pace. He was a strong man now but one day, his hair would go grey and his speed and agility would fail him. Then the time would come when a fitter, bigger and faster man would beat him to a pulp. And during the many times I watched John fight, it was clear that he really had little skill. He fought people who were quick and paced themselves, for some of these fights lasted hours. John never did that; he punched his hardest every time. One day I knew someone would wear him out with less strength but more stamina.

Some of the people he'd fought had a determination which he didn't possess too. These men were skilful and clever, never getting angry and losing their composure, whereas John was always angry and flew off the handle at the slightest provocation. His rushing, chopping style was really no style at all. But he was a man who never looked at himself or planned.

In the ring, he would hurl abuse at his opponents and spit at them. As the fighters milled and sparred, something which could go on round after round with no punches being thrown, he would taunt the other man.

"I've had your wife."

Jab, jab.

"She weren't as good as your daughter though."

Duck, jab.

Some saw all this as part of the fight. That would have been the case if Seller had adopted a persona which he used when fighting. However, Seller acted this way all the time. He was unlikeable in so many ways; I often wondered how he even found someone stupid enough to marry him. Even then, I feared the arrangement was more out of fear than love. Nobody said 'no' to him. His end would have to come from something stronger than a blow from a fist.

I was fortunate enough to witness John Seller's last fight. I had gone to the Old Wagon where, providing I bought a drink, I could blend in unnoticed. I sat on the next table to Seller, pretending to read a newspaper. I hadn't seen his wife

in months and heard another man ask about her. It was not clear to me if she was with child or had given birth. Seller was talking about his wife and I was struggling to listen through the general hubbub of the chatter.

*

John Seller, although not considering retirement, was thinking about buying the Waggon public house. It was what fighters did. He intended to have a fight every other night and sit back and make money.

As he sat supping his ale, he looked around the room and planned what else he would do. He would block the serving hatch on the wall for a start. The pub did not even sell food, it simply charged to heat up what the customers brought in with them. It was a waste of time he thought. Eating meant less drinking. Yes, the hatch would be blocked up.

As he sat planning, alone, a gentlemen in strange attire sat down opposite. John looked up at the foreigner.

“I am from Arabia,” he said taking off his Orange coloured hat and producing three thimbles and a dried pea.

“Watch the pea, where is it?” he said lifting the thimbles, swapping the order of them repeatedly and lifting one occasionally to reveal it.

“One pea, three cups, where’s the pea?” he said again, hands moving at great speed.

Sellers face remained expressionless and he said nothing.

“The pea is here, or is it here?” the Arabian asked.

This game was commonplace in pubs and on the street. The unsuspecting drinker, whose faculties may already be dampened by the ale would win repeatedly and then when it came to a big bet, would lose and by the end of the evening, usually ended up owing money to the man with the thimbles.

“We play for a penny, no?” the Arabian said, “Where’s the pea? Where’s the pea?”

Seller obliged and reached into his purse and produced several pennies.

“Middle,” he said.

As expected, he won. The Arabian feigned disappointment, shrugged and handed Seller a penny. Over the next twenty minutes, the Arabian handed over twenty-seven more pennies.

“Now, I’m a little, how do you say, er imbarassay.”

“Embarrassed,” Seller suggested.

“Yes, I have nearly run out of coins, I have this note though. What say we play for this?”

The Arabian produced a twenty pound note and feigned ignorance, pretending to read the writing on the note.

“I don’t understand the numbers, but I think it will be fine, no?” he said.

Seller nodded agreement and the man proceeded to shuffle the thimbles again.

“Where’s the pea, where is it?”

Seller tapped the thimble on the left, the Arabian lifted the thimble. There was no pea.

“Am sorry,” the Arabian said reaching for the coins. He was about to ask for his winnings but before he had a chance to do so, Seller punched him in the face with so much force he was knocked off his stool and slid across the floor

“Move the dirty Moor,” Seller shouted to the bar tender, taking the bank note, coins and a slurp of his ale.

On the next table an old sat a man reading a well-thumbed newspaper. He looked up at the commotion but said nothing, returning to the dense print of the Manchester Mercury.

Mr. Heymoor of Elm Street takes this method of returninf Thanks to his Friends and the Public, for the Favours they have conferied upon him.

He was half-reading, glancing up every few seconds to check on John Seller.

A young man sat down next to Seller and mumbled something about his wife.

“Skryking day and night,” Seller said.

The old man listened. Did Seller mean his wife or a baby crying?

Seller looked around the pub and the old man leaned closer to the paper, reading anything his eyes fell upon; *Possesions of Robert Cooke, late of Manchefter, carter, Fuftian-manufaeturer, Dealer and Chapman to be sold Jan. 20, 21, and Feb. 8, at the Spread Eagle, in Manchefter.*

Seller muttered something as the old man turned the page of the newspaper, the rustling covered his words.

A surgeon, in Marsden Court HAS the Pleafure to inform you, that William Grigg perfectly cured (by the Ufe of your Maredant's Drops) a mod inveterate Scorbutic Humour. A Safe and fpeedy Cure for all Scorbutic and Venereal Complaints, Ulcerated and Swelled Legs, Billious Diforders, Obftrudtions in the Urinary Paflages,

The man asked Seller another question about his wife and John stared back in silence. The conversation was over.

As if filling the tense silence, a drunk stumbled into the bar, supported by a sober friend. The drunk man immediately climbed up onto a table and said, “Shallenge t’John Seller t’fight reet here and now.”

John stood up and looked at the sober man who shook his head and pointed to the drunk.

“How much?” Seller responded matter of factly. The sober man approached him, opened a leather pouch and showed John the contents.

John nodded, placed his own purse on a stool and sneered at the drunk standing on the table.

Within seconds, the pub became an arena. Without words being exchanged, tables and chairs were stacked and the walls became lined with drinkers. The drunk peered at the crowd, gave an inane grin and attempted to step off the table. He misjudged the distance completely and collapsed onto the floor. John smiled, raised his eyebrows and rubbed his chin. This had happened before, men fuelled with alcohol believing they were strong enough to beat him.

The sober man helped the drunken fighter up and everyone watched him squint trying to stop the room spinning. Seller gave another sigh and reached for his beer. He exchanged glances with drinkers as the drunk fumbled with his coat buttons, took it off and threw it clumsily to the side.

The bar tender stepped forward and tried to organise things.

“No dirty fighting John,” he warned.

“On my son’s life,” he replied.

The head of an old man standing in the crowd looked up suddenly from his newspaper.

“Could you please state your-“

“John Seller, undefeated,” Seller snapped.

Eyes turned to the drunk, who simply looked behind him to see what everyone was looking at.

“You,” said the barman, “Name and, er, particulars?”

The drunk looked confused, “He just teld ya, John Seller.”

“Not *him*, you,” the bar tender shouted.

“Oh, Michael Feeney, undefeated.”

“Undefeated?” the bar tender asked incredulous.

“Well I’ve never fighted before so I’ve never lost,” he said with an idiotic smirk.

The drinkers laughed too, the barman signalled the start of the fight with a hand in the air. Seller crossed his arms wearily and shifted his weight from one foot to another and began to look around the room.

Without warning, the drunk suddenly shot across the room and threw three extraordinary fast punches into Sellers face. He stumbled back in a state of shock. The drunk punched him several more times until Seller fell to his knees. Cheering broke out in the pub, which became a frenzied roar. All eyes fell on Feeney. This man was not drunk at all. The old man watching, smiled, and leant back against the greasy wall.

Seller had dropped his guard and relaxed in the certainty he would win. A few average blows had taken him by surprise and for the first time in his life he had no plan.

Feeney waited for the count and as soon as thirty was called, did what Seller normally did, continued attacking with relentless enthusiasm. Seller barely had time to lift his fists to guard or strike when suddenly he found himself at the receiving end of a dozen body blows, a punch in the nose and more body blows.

Seller began to play dirty; he rushed Feeney, grabbed him by the hams and threw him.

“Foul,” came the shouts of the drinkers.

The bar tender tentatively got in-between the fighters, his eyes apologizing to Seller for having to do so.

Looking dazed, Feeney was helped up and the count began. People grabbed him by the shoulder and reassured him it would be alright. This was the closest anyone had ever seen to Seller being beaten and they wanted it to continue. David and Goliath were at battle.

Seller was not a clever man. Despite falling for the ‘drunk’ trick only a few minutes ago, it was clear that he was now about to fall for the ‘dazed’ trick.

His posture changed, he dismissed the previous few moments and was now, once again, the undefeated champion who had sent his opponents world spinning. Seller studied the glazed eyes of Feeney.

“Not so eager now eh? Want to raise the odds?” he whispered to his opponent.

“Thirty,” came the cry.

Feeney staggered towards Seller, left fist held up but right arm hanging limply by his side, as if it were dead. He looked down at his arm. The crowd looked at the lifeless arm. Then Seller looked at the arm too and in an instant Feeney snapped out of the pretend daze and threw punch after punch at Seller’s face.

The men roared him on.

“Kill him,” they chanted over and over.

Seller’s face had an indescribable expression painted all over it. His legs buckled and for the first time in his life, his vast weight came crashing down onto the rough wooden floors.

Feeney’s celerity alone had impressed the crowd, but when combined with deviousness, was a stroke of genius. The drinkers continued counting to rub salt in the wound.

“Thirty one, thirty two, thirty three.”

As Seller lay on the ground, the winner was called.

Feeney took the purse of bank notes and coins and threw it handful by handful at the drinkers. Through the commotion, Seller crawled to the corner of the room, lifted himself up with both hands on the wall flat on the wall and made his way out of the pub. The old man squeezed his way through the cheering, stepped over the dozens of coins littering the floor and followed the loser outside.

Seller was nowhere to be seen.

The old man cut through ginnels and back alleys, crossed a little wooden cattle bridge and weaved along the banks of the river until, covered in mud, he came to the back of his home.

Even battered and defeated, Seller was still too dangerous for him to attempt to kill singlehandedly.

He lit a lamp if his workshop and fumbled for a wooden box.

Opening it he studied the strange machine for a moment before laying out the equipment in front of him.

It had been five years since he’d last fired it and he had to say each step out aloud to remind and reassure himself that this was the correct order.

“Hammer down,” he said cocking the cold metal with his right hand.

“Thirty grains of black.”

He untied the leather string of the cloth bag and emptied some black powder into a brass measure and then poured it down the barrel of the pistol.

“Cotton patch.”

He placed the gun between his legs to free his hands, unscrewed the lid of the jar and rubbed the square piece of material in goose fat before placing it on the end of the barrel.

“Lead ball on the patch,” he said dropping the shot onto the greased material and stuffing it down the barrel of the gun with a brass rod.

“Primer.”

He put more gunpowder in the flintlocks pan.

“Close the frizzen.”

The old man stood up, put his coat back on, tucked the gun under his arm and left the house.

*

Dear Baby, I often wondered where John’s anger came from. This beast of a man who seemed to have no real reason to hate the world so much. I contemplated the possibility that he would have turned out differently, had he been brought up with a father in his life, but dismissed this when I thought of who his father was. No other members of this line of your family grew up to be as nasty as he did and they were all fatherless.

I clutched the strange device as I walked calmly towards John's house. Having not had any need to hunt animals, shooting had always been, like cooking, the strange pastime of other people. Years before though, I had gone to Stensby the gunsmiths on Market Street and bought a Flintlock Pistol. I had practised a few times how to load the machine and tried it out once in the woods. Now, quite suddenly, the day had come to use it.

The street was dark save for the soft glow shining in Seller's bedroom window. Under my coat, I held the pistol, barrel up. I paused outside his front door wondering how to begin. I could hear a baby crying. The door was ajar. I nudged it open slowly with my muddy boot. The front room was empty.

I stepped inside and heard noises upstairs. A rustle, a struggle, a whimper.

Was he crying? Crying in humiliation at his defeat?

For a second, sympathy swept into my consciousness. Then little Thomas cried again, sending all sympathy away.

I heard Seller's voice. He wasn't crying, his wife was.

I walked up the stairs slowly. Step after step. The noise from the bedroom got louder. Louder than the creak on the stairs, louder than my deep breathing.

I lowered the gun at the scene that met me.

The scene of a coward and bully pinning down his wife on the bed. She was still struggling and had a bloody nose from where he had hit her.

Next to them on the bed, the baby cried. I lifted the gun and walked towards John. His wife saw me and for the first time I realized this was a bad plan. I had been seen by her. There was a witness. Her eyes met mine. She saw the gun, turned her head to one side and shut her eyes.

John noticed something was wrong and turned to see me holding the gun to his face.

“Sure as night follows day, all this ends the same same way,” I said. Things could have been so different at this point. Unlike me, John was agile, fast and powerful. He wasn’t faster than the pistol though.

“*Click*CRACK,” the pistol said. Its final word on the matter.

The room filled with a smoke cloud, through which I could see Seller’s wife struggling to get from under her dead husband’s body and hold little Thomas.

In the days that followed, I didn’t show my face outside. I wasn’t sure what, if anything, Mrs Seller would say. But the newspapers were brought to me each day and it seemed the man’s death was a minor moment of that particular month. No newspaper referred to him as a boxing legend or a renowned prize fighter. Some didn’t even use his name. He was merely a dead man, killed by someone in the night with no witnesses. The matter was never mentioned or pursued. Which leads me onto comparisons between him and myself. In fact, of myself and all your great, great grandfathers. We are all men who dwelled on this planet and

left no mark, no legacy. Nobody remembers us or cares about what we did or didn't do in our lives. Our memories are not worth recording. And this drives me to tell you all this. All these seemingly unconnected things that led to you being born.

I remember the events but the decades have eroded and changed the way I justified them all. It is 1995 and this was all so long ago. For a moment, I ponder if my actions were always justified. The bigger picture, like weather, is hard to visualise. The heat; water rises, clouds form, earth moves, clouds burst, rain falls, hills sit waiting, gravity forces the water downwards, rivers run to the sea to heat and rising vapours. It's the bigger picture that I sometimes lose track of.

Back then the list wasn't really a list at all. Now it is a roll call of your idiot relatives:

Henry Seller 1720 – 1743

John Seller 1743 – 1764

John Seller 1764 – 1793

Thomas Seller 1793 – 1830

George Serrer 1830 – 1848

William Sarah 1848 – 1883

Albert Serah 1883 – 1926

James Serrah 1927 – 1955

This list is tatty, having been in my wallet, pocket, and drawer for generations of your family. It is greasy and well thumbed. I often looked on it and wondered what it all meant. I

thought about the saying “the debts of our parents, the child will have to pay,” and put it into the bigger picture, that of mankind itself. Wars are the same thing, people fighting the grievances of people long gone. This seems to be a recurring theme of life itself. Thinking of times long gone and times so recent.

It is 1995 now but I feel like the past, being so long ago, keeps coming back to haunt me. But then you were born.

A girl.

I made my way down Deansgate, the Roman road as we used to call it and passed a restaurant. It was a fancy new building, electric doors and so new it smelled of glue and paint. Even from outside something caught my eye. I went inside, sat down and pretended to look at the menu. What I was really looking at was a door. An old wooden door.

I stood up and walked over to it speechless. It was the door from my now demolished home. It was the door my father had made, complete with the year carved roughly in the corner.

In the 1980s, my house had met its death by compulsory purchase and I had been rehoused in an old peoples home a few hundred metres away. I had thought all parts of the building were long gone, but here I was, stood in a brand new building, which was using this ancient, battered rectangle of tree as a sophisticated centrepiece to their dining experience.

And for the first time in my life I wished I could go back. Wished I could close my eyes and walk back into 1730’s,

talk to my father. Return to the familiar. Return to a time in which I wasn't aware of time.

I noticed a waiter standing next me, I had no idea how long he had been standing there.

"Are you looking for the bathroom, sir?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Where did this door come from?"

I looked at him and realized he wasn't a waiter at all, but probably the manager or owner. He smelled rich and young.

"Real bit of vintage timber that eh?" he declared proudly, "it's reclaimed wood, antique salvage from a guy in Aberdeen."

He was very proud of it and gestured me to take a closer look.

I did not need to look any closer. I had looked at that door for over two hundred years. I knew the door better than the back of my hand. Unlike my hand, it had barely changed. The manager walked off, leaving a doddering old man to his memories.

I thought of the musty earth floor of my old home, the dampness of wood, the smell of varnish and resin and longed to be back there. To sit down on a chair that my father had made, to see Lizzie again. I touched the wood. It had been treated by wax or a chemical and felt smooth and polished.

"Thou be'st m'door," I whispered to it.

I pushed the door open and closed my eyes, stepped over the threshold. If time travel were possible, this is how it would happen I told myself.

“Can I help you?” a spectacled man said to me, looking up from his desk.

“I thought this was the toilets,” I told him, stepping back into the restaurant.

This was the day that you, nameless baby were born and the past, even though things had been brought to a close, still looming over me.

Let me stop leaping blindly around in time and return upstream, further towards the source, for we are very close now.

On the list, above John Seller is his father, also named John and the more I think back, the less clear it all becomes. That is, my memory of the events are clear, my intentions less so. They say that people in solitary confinement in prisons lose their minds. I’ve come to view my own mortality as an isolation of sorts, for although there are people always around me, they are not the same people and will never grow as old as I have or understand how lonely it becomes.

I am not as old as the land though. The land that is all around me, hidden, suffocating under the tarmac and concrete, fighting through it, to sprout a single blade of grass here and there. And I feel there are some other creatures around who are equally confused at the speed this growth has happened. The

snails that dwell in the sole surviving old corner building on Millgate near Victoria Station must hold in their collective memories, a greener place, one which they slithered up from one day and have been trying to locate ever since. They creep up and down the walls of the dilapidated building, weave through undergrowth that shoots out of the brickwork and fallen masonry of the church that became a casino, they keep searching for that gentle hill that was, in snail time, only recently there.

Likewise, the migrating birds who return to the same place each year. The place which their parents taught them about. They come to nest in the roofs of houses which are now no longer there, trees which exist only as paintings on the walls of galleries or in the form of street names. Oak street with no Oaks, Mulberry Street with no fruit trees. They return to find, that while they were overseas, the past has gone.

Beneath our feet, the rats scuttle through the sewers, tracing the same paths over and over. They surface at night to discover what has happened to the streets above. Below, things have changed little, the roots of once mighty trees lay severed and frozen in time, slowly decomposing, the sets and cobbles of covered and erased roads cross vanished junctions, alongside hundreds of miles of abandoned tram rails, sitting waiting to see sunlight again, invisible from street level, hidden under the tarmac. It is above that all the action happens.

The sun rises over and over, the years stack up and people often tell me I look the same as when they first met me,

decades ago. I smile. Decades is all they are going to get I think. While I will still be plodding on, slowly grinding to a halt.

I have spent so many years trying to make sense of the world and only recently arrived at the conclusion that there isn't much sense which can be made of it. Although I still think of myself as a human being, I've come to regard the species in a detached way as the years plough on. Our collective behaviour is that of an orchestra playing music which other people have written, never realizing we can write our own.

I remember one day sitting at home in the courtyard watching a chicken feather fall closer towards the dirt of the ground. Now it's a silly flash of a memory. My father had built the house in the style of those in his home town, a square structure with a small courtyard in the centre which allowed the light to get into all the rooms of the house with the yard serving as a place to keep animals and store things. He'd told me as a child that chickens will never be able to fly. On that day in 1764, I would have been 45 years old, although from my childlike appearance, I could have easily passed for 20. I watched the feather, the result of some violent butchering from one of the nearby houses, and how the wind carried it upwards. My eyes followed it descended and be carried away again by the breeze.

Although it had been a relatively short time since father had died, the town around me had seen an acceleration in the speed of its growth. My own home too had altered in a way that my father would no doubt have scolded me for. The yard, once open to allow horses into, was now sealed off from the outside after I'd sold a piece of adjoining land. A row of houses had been built immediately next to my home. The window of two rooms, sealed off forever, and the view only of sloppy brickwork.

I would sit in the courtyard and feel somehow cut off from all that was going on outside the walls of the house. From that position, I'd assumed everything would always look the same. The pastel coloured timber beams alternating from soot black to pastel paint again when the rain washed them clean. But things change.

One evening when I was still a young man, my father didn't return home. I went to look for him in the fields and found him lying in the grass, lifeless. At first I was too shocked to do anything. I walked back across the field and to the safety of home. Maybe he had a heart attack, maybe he choked. I didn't know. He never lived long enough to see me blossom in the career he'd chosen for me, and that is something I regret in this life.

He was buried in the graveyard near Hunt's Bank, but nothing being sacred in this town, was soon moved elsewhere

with some of other bodies when the station was built. Other graves they simply built on top of.

The house quickly became too much for one person to manage and within a few years, I sold more of it. Part of me thought I would be able to cease making violins and live off the seemingly massive amount of money for the rest of my life. I also thought that my father's handiwork would be looked after instead of falling into disrepair in my own hands. I was right in some respects. The part of the house I sold was taken down piece by piece, numbered with chalk scrawling, before being loaded onto dozens of carts and taken away. To America I was told, where it would be re-erected in the Mississippi Delta as a quaint old English house in the countryside. The plantation owner had travelled to see where all his cotton ended up. He saw something he liked, offered me a price I couldn't argue with and took what he wanted back home.

This had left me with a long garden which ended with the river. On either side of the garden I sold a little plot here and a little plot there over the years until I was once again virtually enclosed by brick wall, the area around congested with houses, dwellings, tanneries and alleys. I sat in the strange rectangular area behind my house with the river in front of me thinking things would remain this way forever.

Astonishing as it was at the time, the river didn't remain in the same place for long. Decades later, the first railway line shot up on enormous brick arches then a second and third

and fourth line were added; tentacles grabbing at faraway places. Thousands of men managed to dam and block, redirect, channel the river and eventually change the entire course of the water to fit around, aside and under the mammoth Hunt's Bank Station or Victoria as it came to be known. Peculiar survivors clung onto the past; me, my home. In spite of the progress, things clung on to the dissolving past underneath Hunt's Bank station, even in 1995, there is a small wooden cattle bridge over the river, frozen in time. Isolated from the accelerating city above it.

I watched this from my back garden. The river was now closer than it had ever been. Life is strange sometimes. Who would have thought man could move a river?

But before all this, when the river was further away, I watched the feather land. It had risen higher than the chicken ever would. The noise of a cleaver and squawking continued. None of the poor birds would ever fly away. However, in a world where they can move a river, I thought, anything is possible. The dull thud of the birds' fates brought me back to the facts at hand.

Facts are very odd things sometimes. Back then in 1764, in a time when my courtyard was still a courtyard, back in a time when half the things I saw hadn't been transported by sea to another land and rebuilt at the whim of a rich plantation owner, back when I looked out to a river which was in its

original position, I sat and thought of John Seller. That is John Seller Senior.

My ears on the street had told me that he had become the father of a baby boy. John had been overheard telling a flower seller his good news. Even though it was over twenty years since I'd killed his father. I was not the kind of person to back out of any arrangement I'd made. Even John himself had no idea what this arrangement was. Inspiration had called and when the weather was fine and the shadows long I went to find John Senior, striding along the streets with only the weight of the iron cleaver slowing me down.

The old man's presence on the street was unremarkable. In fact, you may even argue that he wasn't an old man at this point. At which point does a young man become an old man? Is it merely a decision set by the age of the onlookers?

He stopped and sat on the steps of a building, looking up at the golden light of the evening as it shone on the red bricks and thought of John Seller.

John Seller left his house each morning, in no particular direction, for no particular reason. He would hang around on busy corners looking for something to do. He would seek out the lost and direct them to where they wanted to go in exchange for a fee, he would carry lady's bags from coach to door for a tip, he would steal any object that was put on the floor, even for a moment, like it was his right to take anything that the owners glance had left for a second, even it were a bag he was carrying for a lady.

Sometimes he would gather objects in an establishment; candles, cutlery, stools, mugs and sell the same object back to the owner, convincing them it was wise they had spares in case of theft. Some regarded John as a friendly idiot, for he was never violent or nasty, others regarded him as a devious and constant pain which they needed to be on guard against.

On the street he would bump into other characters and get embroiled in off hand comments, which soon erupted into wagers and resulted in arguments;

“Rabbits always go by in dozens,” he began saying to one man, who shook his head in disagreement. An hour later, John had wagered his belt on the statement. The two men had bickered about this claim for an hour. How would they prove this to be right or wrong? Why did John even begin such a conversation when he had no knowledge of the subject or way of demonstrating it as true?

The matter was dealt with when a man pushing a hand cart with three dead rabbits hanging, passed them.

“They y’go,” the stranger indicated, “That were nobbut three,” he said clicking his fingers for the belt.

Soon afterwards, he did what he always did if there was nobody on the street; he entered an alehouse he had never been into before and tried to entice the regular drinkers into ludicrous wagers and bets.

“Betcha the next person to come through that door will have one ear missing?”

Silence at the bar.

“Go on, whaja say?”

The silence continued.

“Alright then, next fella in has one ear and will be carrying a piece of mutton.”

The men at the bar squinted in the dim light to get a better look at John. Was this a joke, did he have a one-eared man holding a piece of meat stood outside ready to enter and take their money?

“Come on, lez see y’money,” John jeered, placing some coins on the bar. The barman looked at his customers and then John, fished a dirty coin out of a wet saucer and said, “Aye, go on then.”

Then all the men in the bar turned to the door.

John held his breath. It wasn't out of the realms of possibility, he told himself, that a man with one ear could walk in any moment. They *were* in Salford, people got into fights all the time and had pieces of their face torn, cut or bitten off. The more he thought about it, the clearer it became. They were a few steps away from a meat market too. He could almost see the scene outside; a man, staggering, dazed and beaten would awake in an alley. He would remember little of the battle from the night before, feel a sharp pain on the side of this face where his assailant's dog had snapped its jaws. He would be hungry. Where would he find somewhere that sells something to stop this hunger? He'd cast an eye down the road, right there, a stall selling scrag and cheap meat.

John could see this glorious moment as if it were happening right outside.

The man would peer into his purse and find not just the money to buy the mutton but a penny for ale as well. The one-eared shopper would take off his hat, looking up to the god he suddenly believed in and smile. The mutton would be wrapped in paper and gripping it with two hands, the man would suddenly care nothing of his wound or his uncovered head. He would spot the alehouse and head towards it at full speed, unaware of the wager that rests upon him entering.

Fully convinced that this was going to happen John rubbed his sweaty palms together and put two more coins on the bar.

"He's lost his hat too," he said to the men in the bar. Raucous laughter broke out. The barman obliged and, enjoying the entertainment, matched John's bet.

Then the giggling and snorting subsided and eyes fell on the door. The door which remained closed. John took a deep breath. The average Mancunian scoundrel would, at this point, have realized that the coins were at a snatchable distance, the door close enough to run out of and that the barman, behind the sticky cluttered bar

would be delayed long enough to give him a head start when he ran off with the money. John Seller wasn't possessed with such clarity of thought though. For him, this would be the day that people who frequented this pub would talk about for years to come. The day that a stranger entered and wagered that a hatless, earless meat carrying man would walk through the door next.

The silence continued, the barman wondering how long he would have to wait in order to get his grubby coins back.

John's eyes bulged as he willed the door to open.

"Ee's like a ferret watching a ratton," said a voice from the back of the bar. John moment of self-certainty began to waver and he thought of losing the money he had put on the bar. He thought then of going home to Maggie and his new born son with nothing. He kept his eyes on the door.

How many minutes had passed now? He couldn't be sure. Some of the men at the bar had resumed their chatter, the barman had poured two or three ales, still mindful of his recent wager, glancing at John whose gaze remained fixed on the door.

The bar man wiped a bit of the bar and then threw the dirty wet rag into a pile of sawdust in the corner. A couple of men glanced at the place it had landed with a squelch. Then came the sound of feet on stone steps and a hand on the door. All heads spun round to see it open. John had closed his eyes. He wanted to hear the collective gasp of the men when he was right.

The men adjusted their eyes to the light and saw it was just another of the pubs regulars. A regular who had two ears and a cap and was carrying nothing.

Eyes still closed, John heard the scrape of his money being taken and sighed.

The newcomer, aware that everyone was staring at him took a glance over his shoulder to see what they were so interested in and then stood aside to let John leave.

Outside, he squinted in the light and held his hand up to his face, blocking all sight of the old man stood on the opposite side of the road.

John wouldn't have seen an old man even if his hand hadn't been obscuring his view. The old man resembled someone of 25 years when he was in fact 45. Appearances, as is often said, are deceptive. There were plenty of faces which passed him each day that looked older but were in fact younger. Men and women whose back breaking mill or mine work and bad diet had greyed their hair, driven creases and lines into their faces and rotted teeth.

By 21st century standards, the old man being 45, some would say, is not old at all. By 18th century standards, it was a lucky man who lived to be 45 in what was becoming the first industrial town in the world. And John was not what anyone would call lucky. The old man started to walk behind him, closing the gap with each step. As if to remind himself of the last stupid moments of the day, John pulled his battered leather purse out and stared into it, to confirm beyond all doubt that it was definitely empty.

He then said something aloud. Which stopped the old man in his tracks.

"Sure as night that follows day, all this ends the same same way."

The old man looked around confused for some kind of explanation. Why had John said this now? Curiosity raged through his head and without thinking he tapped John on the shoulder and asked, "I'm sorry to disturb you but what was that poem you just uttered?"

John looked confused. He wasn't aware he *had* just said it aloud.

“Er, it w’summat me Ma used to say to me when I w’little,” he explained.

“And do you know where it comes from?” the old man enquired.

“Nay, she said it were summat me father used to say, only I never knew him.”

The old man nodded and thanked him. John shuffled off and returned to his penniless daydream.

He turned into a side street and began mulling over how he could return home with some food for his family. The word snagged his thoughts; Family. Last week there was just Maggie, now there was Maggie and little John.

He saw the row of back doors. Some open, some ajar, others closed, presumably locked. The old man watched him try the handle of the first and second door. John was as bad at thieving as he was at gambling. He didn’t even look around to see if he was being watched. The old man looked on as John found an unlocked door and disappeared inside.

A few seconds later, he emerged with a joint of beef and still not looking to check the coast was clear, continued down the alley in a world of his own. Tempted by the doors, he hopped up two steps, took off his cap and put his ear to the wood, listening for signs of life inside.

The old man seized the moment and crept behind him, lifted the cleaver and swung at John’s head just as he turned to see who was behind him.

The blade sliced a flap of skin off his face, he opened his mouth to scream but the old man brought down a second and more vicious blow onto the centre of his face and stepped back, leaving the cleaver lodged in a wound of clotting crimson. The old man watch John fall backwards through the door, dropping the meat and crash onto the sawdust covered floor.

Inside the pub, the drinkers turned to see John fall to the ground and gurgle a final breath.

“He just got the wrong, door” the bar man muttered, reaching for a mop.

Dear Baby, even this is wrong now. You will not always be a baby, although this is how I imagine you now. One day, when these thoughts of mine are intended to be understood, you will be a young woman. I don't know what you will make of the whole thing, this whole incredible chain of events. I don't even think it will be possible to get this message to you anymore. These thoughts of mine have long since failed to make it onto paper. The words in my head, directed to you, remain in my head. With all this time at my disposal, I have failed in sufficiently telling you how you came to be. I realize only now that you can't tell a story backwards. Back from your age to the 1950's, 1920's, 1880's and further and further, deeper into unknown waters.

But where is an appropriate place to begin, where does the string of events start? For what was then, isn't tied to what is now, unless you are aware of the thing that connects it all. These connections are everywhere. Manchester only became the city it is today because water was right for manufacturing textiles and only then because men sailed over to America with ships full of African slaves and made them work picking the raw

cotton, which the factories needed. But your story, the story of how you came to be alive, how does that all begin?

If I could ask of you one thing, it would be to imagine two cities. Two completely different places in the world; Rome and Tokyo for example. Picture the images that spring into your head, the smells, the skyline, the faces, the streets and buildings. Even if you have never been to these places, a picture begins to form in your mind like a spreading inkblot. Now try persuading your mind into believing that this is the same place. It is an illogical proposition because they are not the same place, but try all the same. You will be close to feeling how I have lived my entire life.

I know that the memories of my years all took place around the same fields and little brooks but the towering brick buildings try to convince me otherwise. Somehow the growth got out of hand, it mutated into a monster, an animal doubling in size with every heartbeat. The place I grew up in was called Little Horrocks after the hurrocks of piled up stones the crofters left at the side of their land. Then it was just Horrocks or Great Horrocks. Then it was somehow absorbed into a town and forgotten about by everyone. Nothing remained the same, not the water passing it by, not even the name.

And it makes me wonder what a place really is. When does it stop becoming how you remember it? When its name changes? When it looks different? When it feels different? When you are no longer there?

The philosopher Heraclites once said it wasn't possible to step in the same river twice. His student was even wiser and pointed out it wasn't possible to stand in the same river even once. It was constantly changing and was never the same. And so is the place I have lived my life, this village, this town, this city. It is never the same, but somehow, it is still my home.

If it was possible for you to experience Manchester in the 1720s, a number of things would hit you with the speed and unexpectedness of an electric shock. The first would be the air. Fresh, cool air. Air that tastes of vegetation. Air which makes you hungry for more. Air that makes you sleep at night and changes with the seasons, air that takes a sweet and earthy smokiness in autumn as the leaves decompose. The second thing would be the silence. An almost total lack of noise. No shouting, air conditioning, chatter, phones, pylon hum, music or traffic. Little else but birdsong, soft voices, water and the rustle of leaves in the breeze.

At night, there would be the pop and crackle of a wood fire and maybe the faint bubbling of a pot on the stove. Night would be the third thing you would notice. The crystal clear, almost unreal blackness of the night sky, broken only by the bright pinprick of lights. A wrapped sheet of clear unpolluted coldness which this country will probably never see again.

My childhood was spent in a tiny village. A tiny village which I had to watch dying in front of me. Things disappeared

like they were never there to begin with. People, friends, the clean river and my father's native tongue which quickly became obsolete. I saw the otters vanish, the dragonfly that habited the bulrushes by the river disappear. I think of the locals who left, the immigrants who became locals, the water mills, the horses, the coal, the gas lights, the trams, the trade. I alone can testify that all this was the same place for there are no remains left to suggest any of this existed.

I remember it all though; the smell of grass and herbs. The dew, the cottage smoke lingering in the evening air. All the things that got lost in the decades; the trout, the salmon, the eels. I watched as the metal rails took root and stretched further and further, grabbing the fields and the erasing streets. I never quite understood when people talked of progress as if it had some kind of finality to it. For progress is something which is never over, it simply goes on and on until man leaves the location which capitalism or progress has devastated. My own father talked of change like it was a disease and he was right in many ways. The quality of life for the inhabitants of this place continually fluctuated from bad to worse, to, good to reasonable, to bad and so on, as the decades peeled away.

I close my eyes and remember the night clearly. The night it all began, I focus and recall 1743. In one of the many cottages perched precariously on the rocky place over the river. This rocky place had no name, for no one would wish to

go there unless they lived in one of the run down shacks and had to sleep or eat. Steps carved crudely into the bedrock led to the place we gambled. Five of us, all in our twenties; some had brought money, some had brought objects of vague monetary value, a hat, a music box, a leg of lamb, all of us wanted to win. Henry had somehow acquired a violin in a shiny black case, no doubt stolen from somewhere, the kind of people who I played with were not to be trusted. When he saw us look at it with admiration, he refused to risk losing it and told us all it was not for betting. We shot glances to each other. It would be another interesting night.

There were several windows that looked out over the forty-foot drop to the river below, but only one was lit. A faint glow of an oil lamp shone through the tiny buckled, leaded panes. Inside the damp room, five young men had gouged the dirt out of the grooves in the floor and were about to play merrils. Each of them had made their way from the cluster of nearby cottages and cellars where they lived. Each had trodden on snails as they walked down Millgate. Each of them had weaved through the Apple Market, each of them had passed the beggar woman in the street, sat in a ball of filthy shawls, she had moaned a nonsensical proverb to each as they passed her; “Suring night as follows day, all this ends all the same way.” Each man had ignored her, had climbed the sixty stone steps and made their way across a rickety wooden platform which led to the one room dwelling. They had thrown their hats in the corner of the room for there was no other surface to put them on, then they each got out their gambling items.

One man had a half used pencil and all viewed it like it was an object from another universe. Another had a parcel of scrag; meat with more maggot than flesh. Very soon, the interest moved to the black case and musical instrument inside.

“Not f’betting,” Henry told the people in the room firmly.

The urge to play pushed aside any further thoughts about the case and with coins and small items they began to play the game which some of them referred to as Nine Men's Morris, others as simply Merrils.

'Began to play' was a misleading statement. They took the rough wooden balls in their hands and began to plan, to devise who would play who, in which order and for what stakes. This took nearly an hour, discussing the matter and this moment, for some of the men was more enjoyable than the game itself. It meant haggling and bartering over the mere possibility of winning something and calculating the possibilities of who would have the best things to gamble with after the first few games. Chess-like strategies were debated and each man thought several games ahead before even one had been played. After weighing up the different directions the games could take and settling on the order of play, only then could they actually begin.

The games were fast and in less than an hour Henry had lost the handful of coins he brought with him. One of the men nodded to the violin and Henry shook his head.

"Whyja bring it up here then?"

"Not any of y'business."

"Nay then. Ah'need bets. The fiddle?"

"Al'bet summut else, wait," Henry said, deep in thought.

"Me wife, I bet her, no bleedin uses to me she int," said another man.

"Tay no notiz on him, come on, talk proper like."

"Al'not bet that there viola but instead giy'sommut money can't buy, a bit of the future."

"Can't buy you sense," said another man, scratching his head.

Henry continued, “Me name.”

The men stood silent, waiting for the rest of the proposal.

“Me name, you get me family name,” he explained, like he were linked to a respected royal lineage.

“Yant gotta family name.”

“I have that.”

“What is it then?”

“I’m a seller of things and the like, so that’s me name.”

“Nobut an idiot’d believe that.”

“Henry Seller,” he told them, holding his hands out in front of them to show he had nothing else to bet with but his name.

“You have to gamble with something thas wanted. None of us here want your name y’fool.”

“Alright, me first born son.”

“How many times? You can’t bet sommat y’aint got.”

“I cannus like, folk do it everyday, y’swear onya mothers’ life, y’swear onya children. It’s just the same. Don’t all that paper money say it promise to pay us bearers?”

“What deny’vus wan’wiya bairn? If I wanted one ada wed and had me one.”

“I want it,” Henry shouted in defence, “You said I have to gamble a wanted thing, you’d be teken it from me, that’s the bet, you get summat that I want.”

The men in the room said nothing. Wearily one of them summed up, “And you, Henry Seller, are betting your first born son.”

“Aye”

“If y’ent got brass then I’m off,” said one man, taking his hat and leaving.

The men viewed Henry with contempt. They shared another unspoken series of glances. If he won, they wouldn't let him have anything. They prepared the floor again.

A few seconds later Henry frowned, "Canus change me bet?"

"Nay, it stands."

"Does that mean I have to kill this poor child whenever it appears?" one man laughed.

"Aye. Maybe you don't want to win so bad now eh?" Henry smiled.

"Ay lads, this is nonsense, all nonsense, play a solid game like, bet the instrument."

"I'm not bettin that there violet," he said pointing to the instrument, "I'll bet my son."

"We don't *want* y'son!" shouted one of the men.

"Alright, me son and his son and his son and his son fuslong, as long as it takes. Thas what I'm bettin'."

"What about daughters?" one man joked.

"Nah, I don't bet my daughters."

The other men laughed. The situation wasn't funny, Henry was the joke.

"He's betting us things he dunav but keep'n olda othus."

The ridiculous exchanges were too much for one of the men and he grabbed Henry by the cuffs and shouted, "You can't bet something you don't have."

"Joan's with child," Henry admitted feebly.

A silence fell over the room.

"If it's a boy you have it, it's a girl you don't, fifty fifty."

"Stupid, it's all stupid," the men muttered.

One man produced a knife, tired of his time being wasted.

“Calm yeself,” I said, gesturing to put his weapon away, “I’m playing against Henry now, so I decide whether or not to take his offer.” I looked at him and weighed up the nonsensical wager.

“Listen here,” I looked at Henry, “I’ll take y‘odds if you add your life to that list too. All well and good throwing others’ lives into the pot but how about you?”

He looked at me and fingered his beard nervously, weighing up in his mind the possible loss of the things he didn’t have and things he did. Back then, it wasn’t unknown for men to sell their wives or their children for work, Henry had merely extended the possibilities of this idea. If things had been different, he could have been a respected man. In this era, strange things were happening with similar ideas; propositions and money.

In Holland men had become millionaires from trading in tulips or rather bulbs that hadn’t even flowered and in France other people were selling slices of companies that hadn’t yet made a profit.

I pressed him, “Come on man, y’make daft offers like this all the time coz y’think nowun’ll ever tek y’up on em.”

He had a perplexed look in his eyes. Like he was contemplating the moment he would have to take the baby from him wife and leave the house with it.

“And I’m not tekin y’word ferit either,” I said reaching into my money pouch. I pulled out a piece of crumpled paper I’d torn off a wall on my way there. It was an announcement of an auction for land near the farm. I turned it over, brushed the speckles of glue off it and reached for the pencil I’d won. I gave it a shake for dramatic effect.

“We’ll do this properly,” I told him and began to write, scratching the letters on the rough surface, “I Henry…. what’s your family name again?”

“Seller. Listen, I can’t read.”

“You don’t need to, this contract will belong to you, now what’ll it be, this or the violin.”

Henry eyed the instrument and the paper and nodded to the paper.

“*I Henry Seller of Allen’s Court, bet my own life and my future sons’ lives-*“

“Not m’daughters though,” he interjected.

“Aye, *but not daughters, if I lose this game*.” I wrote.

“and all bets off if I have a girl,” he added. I wrote this down too and then scribbled 1743 in large letters and handed him the paper.

“Make your mark there,” I told him, “and keep it, it’s not mine…. yet.”

Ten minutes later, I took the piece of paper back off him and put it back into my purse.

“Now it’s mine.”

“Alright, letus bet that there violin,” he stammered.

The violin and contract game drew more attention than any contest I’d ever seen before. It was like we were playing for a sack of gold. We started to play again and suddenly the insane spark in him was ignited. I don’t think he had been drinking that night, but he acted like he were drunk on luck. His face lit up and for a few moments, he truly believed he was invincible. So much so, that he began to grin and tried to taunt me by reciting the nonsense the beggar woman on the street shouted to passers-by, adding a devilish intonation designed to convince me I was about to lose. He said “suring night as follows day, all this ends all the same way.”

“And what way’d that be?” I asked with a sigh.

“Just wait till you lose and you’ll see,” he replied. “not just lose, but lose wiya grand fall back to the ground.”

Just over five minutes later, I stood by the window viewing the strange wooden instrument in the light. My first violin.

The games carried on that night, Henry soon dismissed his stupid losses and high on the knowledge that the future could be gambled away and with much talk of tulips, he wagered his wife to another man and won the game, a table he didn’t possess to another, which again he held onto and then a week of unpaid

labour, which to his dismay he lost, but to his credit, pointed out that no conditions were made as to when the week of labour would commence.

“Games over lads,” one of them announced. Only two of us still had anything to bet, I was one and Henry, by then without shoes, wasn’t the other.

“Ee came ‘ere shoon and left wi’nun,” our host said as we exited.

We went our separate ways. I took the violin home and placed it in the corner of the kitchen. From this moment on, things weren’t the same. I was still the same person, the house I lived in was the same but the future was no longer what it could have been. It was a small, almost forgettable moment which changed the course of history; his, mine and yours. Altered forever.

Him. I think about him and the rash choices he made. His son’s. His son’s son’s and so on. It’s the same man I tell myself. Something I’ve thought over and over. This man born in a village, which turned into a city. This man, father of a man who was father of what was effectively the same person. The physical resemblance came and went, with the generations, I don’t mean to say his sons all looked the same, but something deeper was present in his offspring. If such a thing exists, the soul was of the same man. The same man I had been pursuing all these years; the eyes bearing the same greediness. Looking

back, there was some uncanny knowledge between the eyes of all the men as they realized they were about to die.

A few months later, all had changed. I had changed. I had begun my apprenticeship. I had buried my father and had a debt to settle.

In the middle of the night, I walked into a grimy alley near Allen's Court and on to where Henry lived. Amongst the pigs snuffling and clatter of pots, I could hear the baby crying, I knocked on the door, Henry opened it.

"Boy or girl?" I asked.

"Boy," he said. He could have lied, but I don't think he expected the consequences of the wager to be finalised in quite the way we had agreed on the night of the game.

"My father taught me never to let people get away without paying what they owe."

I could see his gaze change as he racked his mind for what he had promised me.

"In case you forgot, I have this contract here."

I must have looked serious, for he said nothing, just stared back at me.

"Come with me," I told him.

We zigzagged through the maze of alleys, him close behind, still probably under the impression I was going to teach him a lesson about betting things he didn't possess. Stepping over pools of sludge and horse manure we reached a break in the houses, a two foot gap peering down onto the dirtiest part of

the rocky river bank where the waste of the houses above trickled down to the flowing water. Rats scuttled amongst the rotting cabbage, turnip and potato peelings.

“Look down there,” I told him.

As he peeked over the wall I smashed him over the head with a rock. It was an unimpressive wet sound, like an apple being split underfoot in a puddle. He keeled over onto the wall, legs limp and arms and head dangling over the drop. I took a firmer grip on the rock and gave him another three or four blows to ensure he was dead before picking his legs up and letting gravity do its part in tipping him into the waters below. The child, for now had to live though.

Despite the fact I can clearly see this repetition, the same genes rearing their ugly heads in each baby; it was something they would never see. A sadness had swept over me maybe a hundred years after the first killing. That this is the plight of all of us surely, to die. The only insight to human nature I had gleaned was bleak beyond all imagination. We were destined to play out the same mistakes over and over. In different clothes, to different backdrops they came and went. I was as guilty of this as the Seller family were. I had remained tightly glued to my side of the deal as they had remained bad gamblers. Evolving yet remaining static, changing and remaining the same simultaneously. I had seen my home evolve in a way no place ever had done before. I had seen Manchester rise and fall just as I had seen a foolish line of losers constantly trying

to win. But with or without me, they would always die. The city, which changed beyond recognition with every century, was still the same place through all of this. It had looked on with less interest than a dog would view a newspaper. The place I grew up. It sat on the same bedrock. Amongst the multitude of people, millions of tons of concrete had been poured upon it and weighed heavy on its back, but the same roads were still there underneath it all. And a river still ran through it.

The old man remained staring at the old wooden door as he sat back down at the table. The waiter came over and asked if he wished to order a drink or eat. He glanced at the menu for a second and said, “Yes, I’ll have a bottle of this wine,” he said pointing to a word which meant nothing to him and grinning a little as he said it. It was something he never envisaged himself saying. The words sounded wrong, like they were another language. He thought for second, a whole series of lives flashing before his eyes.

“And while you’re here, I’ll have everything on the menu.”

The waiter smiled, frowned and said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch that.”

“Everything. I want to order everything,” the old man said, closing the leather bound book.

“Apart from the salad,” he added, passing the menu back to the waiter.

“Perhaps you are after a sampling platter?” he said confused.

“No, I’d like one of everything on the menu. The streak, the fish, the soup, the pate, the desserts, everything.”

The waiter backed away and spoke to the manager. The old man stared at the door again.

When the two men returned to the table the old man was ready.

“I have enough money. Here,” he said to them taking several fifty pound notes from his pocket and tossing them towards the men.

“I’m celebrating, so I’d like everything on the menu please. All at once or plate by plate, it makes no difference.”

The manager nodded and scampered away to the kitchen with the mammoth order.

Ten minutes later a number of dishes arrived. The old man clasped his hands together and looked in awe at the food in front of him.

His took his knife and fork and sliced a tiny piece of steak, placed it in his mouth and chewed. As he did so, he sliced a piece of fish and a piece of chicken. Chewing each piece with the bizarre contorted expression of a man who had never eaten cooked food before. He sipped a mouthful of red wine, shaking his head with a wry smile and looking at the glass with shock. Next, he drank some of the white wine, again smiling and shaking his head.

This was followed by mouthfuls of rice, pastry, a chip, a sip of beer, smoked haddock and cheese. He hadn’t even noticed the cheese plate arrive being so absorbed in the storm of taste his tongue was experiencing.

As he ate, the waiter came over to ask if everything was as he expected. Instead of being sent away with a nod or acceptance, the old man sent him back with an order for cigars.

By the time they arrived, he had tasted wood pigeon and with Lizzie’s voice ringing in his ears, his first pie. He didn’t know what to make of any of these new tastes, his stomach growled with confusion like it had been fed a bowl of polystyrene and gravel.

He lit the cigar and inhaled deeply, not knowing if you were even supposed to inhale its smoke or just savour it in your mouth. He thought of his father and then the long line of fathers who lives he'd brought to a premature end. He stood up, raised his glass and said to nobody, "Here's to Henry, John, John, Thomas, George, William, Albert, James, Keith and his baby daughter," before crashing to the floor in a heap.

A few days later the old man became a curious footnote in history, nothing more than a strange, brief column in the Wednesday evening edition of the Manchester Evening News. An unidentified elderly man, who had died in a restaurant. He had no identification and was found to be carrying nothing more than a tatty list of names and a WW1 service revolver. Sources stated that he had ordered over thirty dishes from the menu, a cigar and drank shots of vodka, whiskey and brandy before falling unconscious. An ambulance was called, but the man was pronounced dead at the scene. Foul play was not suspected but the police were requesting relatives to come forward.

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If a city could die, then like humans, it would no doubt relive its past in a matter of seconds, backwards; gone would be the towering office blocks, the cheap hastily built structures, gone would be the motorway ring roads, flashing before its eyes as it gasped its last breath. Gone would be the suburbs, retreating houses like an oil slick in reverse. Open space creates factories as bombs fly back towards the sky and the factories then disappear back to brickyards and quarries. Gone the traffic, gone the train tracks, trolley buses and tramlines. Farewell to the streets within streets within alleys and courtyards. Gone the buildings of commerce and boom factories,

gasworks, bleach works, tanning pits, coalmines. All receding and retreating. Cobbles disappear to reveal dirt, dirt disappears to reveal tufts of grass. Factories, mills, are wiped out as thousands of houses are deconstructed and rubbed out as if they were never there. Back to the earth go the walls, the farms, slaughterhouses, barns, houses, the inns, taverns, weaver's cottages and windmills. Wider and wider become the fields and forests. Back come the lakes and ponds, rocks and all you would be left with is rocky undulating greenery.

With a river running through it.

COMPLEMENTARY DISCOURSES

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Manchester Metropolitan University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Section One: Once Upon A Time – The Personal

A number of things influenced the writing of *A River*. They all involve strands of the past, which somehow manage to avoid the effects of time and exist in the present day, almost by accident; they are all things that survive.

Firstly, when I was ten years old, I used to play on a huge area of waste ground that had previously been a railway. The line itself had closed in the early 1970's, so to me it had always been just a few miles of dirt track with embankments and an abandoned, overgrown station platform. A piece of this land was sold to a housing company and *JCB*s moved in to build a small housing estate. They tore up the tracks and sleepers and began to dig deep holes in the ground for the foundations.

One day, when the builders had finished work, I wandered around the site, jumped into one of these pits and had a look at the walls of soil. I quickly noticed something other than dirt, something which had been undisturbed since around the 1840's. The diggers had cut directly through the deep rubbish pit of a farm which had stood there, until the railway was built. Layer upon layer of objects peeked out of the soil; fragments of pottery, sections of burnt logs, empty blue coloured glass poison bottles, coloured ribbon, animal bones and fragments of legible local newspapers. Someone else's rubbish became exciting and I poked with a stick to unearth more discoveries; broken cutlery, pieces of rusty jewellery, metal objects with green rust on them, buttons, tatty leather shoes, beer bottles and chipped stoneware flasks with the manufacturers name displayed.

Until then, history had been something that existed only in books. It meant names, dates and drawings of dead kings and queens. To me, the pit was time travel, but unlike the rings of a tree trunk, which merely represented time passing, these were layers which could be touched and handled, investigated and taken away to show people, "Check out this poison bottle I found," became my catchphrase for a few days.

Some of the objects were extremely well preserved. It was hard to comprehend they had been thrown in a hole and forgotten by everyone for over a hundred years, which was an

inconceivable amount of time for a ten year old. By the end of the month the mysterious hole in the ground had been sealed away again, covered in houses, tarmac and someone's front lawn. Like a hundred other childhood experiences, this moment remained in my memory somewhere until, like the pit itself, the diggers moved in to unearth it. It was a seam of ideas, to be mined at some future point. One which could be approached from different angles, but remained part of the same seam.

Decades later, I was looking at some maps of Manchester. The contemporary ones showed the sprawling area *Victoria Station*, the older ones showed the area to be even larger as it was then connected to the now demolished *Exchange Station*. Going back further, there were less railway lines shooting out from its centre and as I looked back even further to the 18th century maps, I noticed the river Irk, now hidden deep underneath the station. On these early maps, the area was occupied by an orchard, a graveyard and a prison. The maps show a stone footbridge and a wooden cattle bridge crossing the waters.

In the 21st century, with a series of mammoth apartment blocks built beside its semi-rusting hulk, the 17th century image of greenery is difficult to imagine and seems to have left no trace. In 2013 when builders began to work on the station, they first had to remove all the bodies left in the graveyard underneath the platforms and then they discovered foundations of mystery buildings below this, alongside huge pits of oyster shells[1], then finally hit the rusty coloured bedrock and the twisted clusters of orchard tree roots.

Despite this change, the tiny sandstone bridge on Redbank, the road running under the station is still there, with the station built over it and most astonishing of all, in recent years, urban explorers have revealed that the little wooden cattle bridge is still there, still crossing the river, buried deep underneath the station in permanent darkness.

[1] Dumped in a time when oysters were the food of the poor and even served in prisons.

Figure 1 Cattle Bridge beneath Victoria Station

How is any of this connected to my novel? These surviving objects and pathways somehow mirrored other ideas floating around my head. They were all things which had at first glance, left no physical trace of their existence behind. I thought of my grandfather, who had died before I was born. What trace had he left? I had seen photographs of him but these were just tree trunk rings; representations of what had been. Where were the things that had he had owned, the physical objects? To me, the only evidence he had existed were words; the stories my own father told me about the man I never met. He, like the majority of people, existed in the form of words.

Again, what does this have to do with my novel? Where was the connection between these words and objects? Words meant stories. The chemist's or dairy bottles or button I found in the pit weren't just random objects. They were an image of a farmer with a loose shirt, smashing a bottle of milk while taking medicine to a member of his family.

I found that wherever I looked, there were curious historical fragments to be discovered. I viewed the modern day city with suspicion now. History was deeply ingrained in its streets. In their names, in the directions they took; curving to follow a stream which was no longer there. The more I dug, the more interesting things I discovered. *St Anne's passage*, the pretty chequered-tile covered walkway between shops was not just a pleasant architectural design to cut from King Street to St Anne's Square. It existed because it divided two pieces of land in the 17th century and the

Figure 2 St Anne's Passage

landowners had insisted it remain as an access route between fields, even when the land was leased or sold. A route which survived contractually as the land and buildings were bought and sold. It remains today even though the fields are long gone.

I had no intention of trying to knit these scattered and unconnected strands together into a historical account of Manchester or to force them into a novel format. I didn't want a wealth of research to be a flimsy excuse for an afterthought of story, but seemingly unconnected things can often find their own way of becoming connected. These ideas were like a magic eye picture; suddenly they all fell into place and an image appeared. Or rather, the human mind finds connections when left to its own devices.

In Heider and Simmel's oft cited 1944 experiment on perception, subjects were shown an animation of two black triangles and a black circle moving around the screen, and they then proceeded to perceive a full story featuring the shapes as characters.[2]

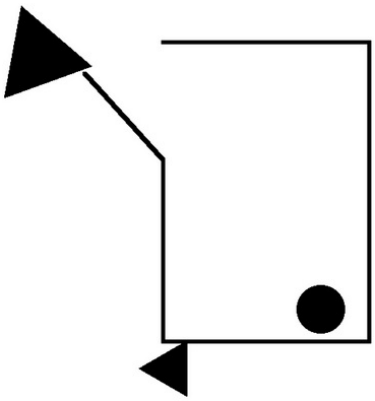

Figure 3 Heider and Simmel still image.

I allowed my subconscious to connect these unrelated areas and what followed was an avalanche of thoughts, one problem leading to another, one question bringing a list of problems and each of the solutions bringing more questions.

Almost before I knew it, I was holding the foetus of a novel with a notebook of questions to accompany it; how does a novel become one? What is a story? What isn't a story? Why are people constantly inviting these tales, real or imagined, into their lives?

[2] It is worth mentioning that this 'perception' was not entirely without encouragement; "write down what is happening in the film," and "what kind of person is the big triangle," two of the questions the subjects were asked, both clearly imply that something is happening and that the shapes do represent characters.

At this stage this was still just the premise of a novel. I had a scattering of thoughts; a location, a river, history, growth, change, time and age flowing. How the present occurred out of a mix of repetition, chance, accident and planning. It felt right to set the novel within a time of great change in Manchester. The period of 1700-1995 interested me because it covered so many different eras and extremes. It seemed to be a good timeframe to write within; before 1700 there was little change in Manchester, things ticked over from one century to the next. The change which occurred during the Industrial Revolution remains breath-taking, even when viewed from the 21st Century. The next shift in the city is arguably the 1996 IRA bomb. This signalled a new chapter in Manchester's story and character and one which I wanted to keep out of the novel. I wanted to concentrate on what was long gone instead of what was currently happening.

My father's descriptions of 1950's Manchester are of a grey bombsite. The mental image for someone who moved to Manchester in 1997 or after would be of shiny new glass buildings, pubs, clubs and restaurants. My own memories of 1980's and early 1990's Manchester clash with someone who moved to the city in 1997 or after. The period I remember was a place devoid of shiny new glass buildings, loft apartments, chain coffee shops or trams. After midnight, my memories of the city centre are of silent, dead, empty streets.

Before I began to write, I needed to determine boundaries. These weren't necessarily boundaries I was comfortable working within. Prior to *River* I had written two novels which were both freeform and rambling; constructed from hundreds of fragments of thoughts, ideas and conversations. *River*, while still giving me the freedom to write chapters I would enjoy, also restricted me to very specific locations, times and characters. I had not attempted to write any historical fiction before, I just had a notion that the character I would be dealing with was born in the 1700s and still alive in 1995. By character, I was thinking of both the fictional character and the character of Manchester itself, which I wanted to feature as more than just a backdrop but as a place which has looked on as humans erased its greenery and swarmed all over it like termites.

When reading early novels, I became aware that descriptions of towns were almost entirely absent, the focus lying wholly on the story or characters within it. Dickens' description of streets and markets was infinitely more vivid than Defoe's because writers of Defoe's era simply did not attempt to depict it in as much detail as writers a hundred years later would. David Lodge, discussing Fielding and Defoe states that London is described only in terms of class and status and that 'there is no attempt to make the reader "see" the city, or to describe its sensory impact.'[3]

Again, I attributed this to viewing the city as a character. Until the *Industrial Revolution*, change in towns was so gradual that locations did not need to be described; there was no other way of life to depict or record. The post romantic writers however were acutely aware of the fact that their era was different and changing, so the importance of location in fiction reflected this.

Even though I was dealing with a three hundred year old fictional character, I was keen to avoid any hint of science fiction or fantasy. This was to be a straight forward 'fact' of the story in the same way that Oskar in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum* chooses not to grow anymore. I was aware how easy, some may say lazy, it would be to have a three hundred year old character at their disposal and have them meet or interact with important historical figures through the ages. I kept John Boyne's *The Thief of Time* at the top of my 'routes to avoid' list. Boyne's novel, like my own, revolves around a three hundred year old man. Along the way, his character becomes somehow entangled in a number of world history events such as the French Revolution, the Great Exhibition and the Wall Street crash. There were other examples of this kind of novel and film such as *The Legend of 1900* and Jonas Jonasson's *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared.* As tempting as it may have been, I wanted to remain as far away as possible from those ideas. I wanted to capture some sense of normality in the character's life and show that living a long life in the real world doesn't result in fantastic adventures with key figures in history. In fact, as I began to research longevity, I found that it was often the opposite; descriptions of super centenarians often highlighted how quiet the life they had led had been. Despite this, some of these people had still written

[3] David Lodge, *The Art Of Fiction.*

autobiographies; Henry Allingham, the twelfth oldest man in the world, who died at the age of one hundred and thirteen, was one such person. His life story is not a book replete with endless adventures spanning over a hundred years. Instead, it is the encounters of a man who fought in the First World War and otherwise lived a very normal and slightly boring life. He sums up three decades in a couple of paragraphs and only when he turned one hundred did he begin talking to people about his wartime experiences.

Likewise, Jean Clement, regarded to be the oldest verified person in the world, who lived to be 122, lived another quiet life and with the exception of selling canvas to Van Gogh as a young girl, did not find herself in any other noteworthy situations. I wanted to capture something akin to this kind of life, one in which the world around the person changed dramatically, but they themselves remained the same.

Although probably not the most conventional or practical way to write a novel, I found myself stripping away the attributes I *didn't* want the story to have. My one clear vision from the outset was that I didn't want to write a linear history of events through the ages. I wanted to use Manchester as an integral character around which situations would repeat through the decades and where the reader could join the narrator in viewing the change as time passed. There would have to be a strand which ran through the centuries and held the chapters together, but rather than envisaging a chain of events, where one thing led to another, I wanted to somehow have the same event reoccurring, with the same mistakes played out generation after generation, echoing, albeit with a different interpretation, the Santayana quote, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'[4]

With the setting and time frame settled, I developed my map of the events; throughout the years, the central character would be present. He would murder a man from each generation of the Seller family lineage due to a long forgotten wager. Another quote stuck with me as I made my plot notes:

[4] George Santayana (1905) *Reason in Common Sense*, p. 284, volume 1 *The Life of Reason*

'Men make their own history, but they do not do it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'[5]

With this, I envisaged both the characters and Manchester itself, along with the actions of people from the past and their power to affect every subsequent aspect of the present.

The three hundred year old character, I decided would not be a master criminal, but an ordinary person, someone with a job who led a solitary existence. I began to wonder what occupation this person could have had in the 1700's which they could still be doing in the 1990's and stumbled upon violin making. In 1700 this would have been a new craft, but was a craft that changed very little in the subsequent centuries. I read books on violin making and spoke to luthiers to enquire what problems they might face if they stepped into a workshop circa 1750. To my delight I discovered that other than working less in winter due to lack of electric light, almost nothing had changed. There can't be that many professions which survived the Industrial Revolution in this way, so my narrator became a luthier.

As I read about the intricate process of making violins I found the statement expressed by a present day Brooklyn luthier who described his shop as:

'…any shop throughout history. Some of the tools are more sophisticated - clamps and things. But I would say that Stradivari could walk into this shop and, after a few hours of looking around, could work here quite comfortably.'[6]

With characters and a sketchy plot, I was still unhappy about writing the events in chronological order. I felt that when told this way, an A to B story would imply or suggest that C or climax is on its way. I feared that a linear form would disappoint a reader unless there was a payoff or conclusion for them at the end. I searched for other novels told in in a non-linear way

[5] Karl Marx*, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* 1852

[6] John Marchese, *The Violin maker*.

Conrad's *Lord Jim* sprung to mind because it is told in fragments from different viewpoints and in the form of stories within stories, often with different points of the tale running at the same time or being revisited by different characters. More glaringly however were detective or crime novels. Novels from this genre typically began with a crime or mystery, which the characters and readers in turn, discover more and more about, before eventually, by way of dead ends, red herrings and misdirection, learn the facts in their correct order.

I was aware that whereas crime novels begin with a mystery and end with a revelation, my novel would not be working back towards a payoff or reward for the reader at the end. I wanted to highlight the fact that often, small seemingly insignificant actions have consequences which last generations. In my novel, it is a frivolous remark made in the 18th century, which results in the deaths of several people, in reality, this kind of domino effect could be seen in such instances as Abraham Lincoln being directly responsible for the creation of Jazz.[7]

It was more common to find examples of non-linear narratives in film, no doubt because it is easier and more immediate to do: 'Cinema makes more demands on our senses and nerves and fewer demands on our imagination than any other art.'[8] A two-second flashback in film can deliver a massive amount of information unachievable in even the snappiest novel flashbacks.

I have always been fascinated with how *Pulp Fiction* unravels with the scenes in a haphazard, seemingly random order; the first and last scene consist of the same moment, shown from slightly different viewpoints and the core of the film flits back and forward from one strand (Butch) to another (Vincent) whose paths cross momentarily. In chronological order, *Pulp Fiction* isn't particularly riveting, rewarding or absorbing. There are two smaller story arcs and no payoff for the viewer at the end. When the scenes are cut and pasted in non-sequential order as in the final cut, the viewer has to work a little to determine where or what the story is and in turn, is rewarded by realizing how these characters and scenes interlock. In 1994, when I originally saw the film at the

[7] The simple version of events would be Lincoln ending the civil war, resulting in thousands of marching band instruments ending up in American pawn shops at dirt-cheap prices. Freed slaves bought these affordable cornets, clarinets, tubas and trombones and in the space of a few years an entirely new genre of music was born.
[8] Gerald Mast, *Film/cinema/movie; A Theory of Experience.*

cinema, I was so enamoured that I immediately bought another ticket and watched it again. Despite this, I had no intention of emulating Tarantino's back and forth method in my novel. Instead, as if punishing myself and making the task even more difficult than it already was, I set myself the task of telling the story backwards. I have always believed the unfamiliar to be far more interesting than the familiar, so started the novel in the 1990's and edged further back towards the origin or beginning of the story in the same way I had reviewed the maps; starting with the familiar and delving back into the unknown. I wanted to show the various eras of Manchester and highlight how different they were from the present day. I hoped that the reader would begin with a 20th century familiar place and slowly find themselves further and further away from their comfort zone as the novel progressed.

With these parameters set, the writing process was akin to attempting to make a meal out of the contents of someone else's fridge; I had several unfamiliar things and a slight idea of what I was going to make out of it all; it could all go hideously wrong and I might have to fall back on some literary corn flour if things got too messy. The problems and solutions came and went as I wrote.

Planning and writing a timeline of the narrator and the various members of the Seller family was necessary (see appendix) and helped me sketch out the episodic moments and chapters of their lives. I had a rough idea how each member of the family would be killed, but this could be changed with little effect to the preceding or following chapters as they did not reference each other.

The sections and chapter headings (in my notes they are simply named Lizzie, Boxing, Market, Arsenic etc.) were written independent of each other, almost as if they were short stories, with an eye on the fact that I was dealing with the son or father of the adjoining chapter. This was duly noted in the workshops[9] with people commenting that the excerpts they were reading were self-contained but clearly belonged to a larger 'thing.'

[9] During the writing of *River* I attended a monthly PhD Creative Writing workshop and a second smaller group consisting of members of my previous Creative Writing MA. I would submit 3000 sections and receive comments and suggestions regarding the submission along with discussing the chapters. The submissions were not read in chronological order but the comments on style and point of view were very useful. Trying to select a 3000 chunk of the novel however became increasingly difficult as time went on. Unlike the other writer's novels, my chapters were not of equal length and did not

Nietzsche, referring to children, states that they learn the words 'once upon a time' and become aware that: 'their existence really is an imperfect tense that never becomes a present.'[10] I quickly found a number of point of view problems when dealing with the novel's narrator, who is both narrating his present and reminiscing about the past.

The novel is split into three sections; A is told in first person by the nameless old man and third person by an omnipresent narrator. B is told in alternating second and third person. Finally, C mirrors A; first and third person.

I can't recall the exact reasons for withholding the name of the old man narrator but after a number of chapters had been workshopped, a couple of people objected to not knowing his name. I responded that his name was irrelevant and the story would be unaffected with or without knowing it. David Lodge states that: 'a fictional story is unlikely to engage our interest unless we know whose story it is.'[11] I wondered if this was just the preference of the reader. Does it depend on what the story is? Do we need to know the author of a romantic novel any more than children need to know who is telling a fairy tale?

As the months went by, the same people asked why I couldn't include the name just once to satisfy their need to know who was telling them the story. Subsequently, his name was never revealed, partly to see if I could get through the whole novel without mentioning it and partly to vex the people who it seemed to bother so much.

Unconnected to the name of the narrator, I had recurring issues with tense and point of view, which I never entirely or satisfactorily resolved. I soon discovered that each point of view had its benefits but none of the three were suitable for the whole novel. The omnipresent third person sections were perfect for providing description, dialogue and scenes in a standard novel format. The old man's narration, in the form of a letter which he intends to one day write to the first Seller daughter, floats from thought and intentions and divulges some of his story, holding back on the

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necessarily have an arcing structure or conclusion within each of them. Sometimes, when read on their own readers were confused at the digression from what they believed the story to be.

[10] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thoughts Out of Season Part II*.

[11] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction.*

dialogue and description. His tone of voice also offers the chance to meander and reminisce about things in a way that would seem too irrelevant, opinionated and unnecessary in the third person. As both the third and first person chapters are effectively describing the same events, they can, on reflection both be considered as being as third person, in that for the most part, they are detailing the exploits of the Seller family. I couldn't seem to resolve this conundrum. If I omitted the old man first person voice, I would lose some of the thoughts and reminiscing, whereas if I omitted the third person I would lose some of the poetic prose and have to shoehorn pages of dialogue and description into the old man's words, and after all, he is a violin maker, not a novelist.

The second person sections were written both to place the reader at the centre of the scene without seeming like it and to provide a break from the first and third person similarities. The second person is there to distract the reader from noticing my first vs third issues. Again, sustaining the second person for the whole novel seemed like taking a good thing beyond its limits. I envisaged there would be chapters of struggling second person if I went in this direction and that it would be more of a novelty (a whole novel written second person) , which would overtake and detract from the point.

Often, chapters were written in one tense then completely rewritten in another; using the boxing chapter as an example, it was originally in the old man's voice, with him as an observer. Then, I reflected that there was too much action taking place. Action which was too blatantly like fiction narrative and that stuck out as not being how the old man would think and also inconsistent with the content of a letter, so it was rewritten in third person.

Even with the location and old man, who are present throughout the time-span of the novel, I wondered what other elements would hold it all together and enable the novel to be viewed as a whole and not a series of several short episodes. I found similar devices such as in the film *The Red Violin*, where a single instrument is owned by different characters throughout history or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* which is held together by the generations of the same family.

I sought out other novels which played with form, time and order while maintaining cohesion and found that although stylistically very different to my own novel, *The Long View* by Elizabeth Jane Howard, succeeded in heading down the path I was taking, that of telling the story backwards, with each section regressing further back in time.

Other than the recurring two main characters, who grow younger, and their children who become babies as the parents become teenagers, Howard's sections are linked with a feather subtlety by devices such as the opening sentences of the sections: 'This, then was the situation,' 'The situation was perfectly simple,' 'The situation had been growing steadily worse for days,' 'The situation between them must, she supposed, have been changing, since the moment they married,' and finally, 'their situation was beautiful.'[12]

I admired these micro-ripples, themes which the reader, a hundred pages into the novel, would no doubt have completely forgotten about when the next 'situation' occurs. They were light literary slights of hand, tucked away as if they were just another sentence in the chapter but in fact, served as subconscious traffic lights for the reader. I experimented with the idea of a recurring motif like Howard's 'situation' or Fitzgerald's green light in *The Great Gatsby* but discovered I had resolved the issue almost without realizing. I had been peppering the chapters with almost unconscious references to moving masses of water and river allusions. The opening paragraph backtracks to the ice age, melting water shaping the land and over millennia becoming a humble river, in lush green land which eventually is settled in and becomes Manchester, but also the river as a metaphor, the river as a philosophical topic: 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man'[13] and the retort, that: 'it is not possible to step in the same river even once, for it not the same river'[14] were both ideas which resonated with the themes and characters of the novel.

[12] Elizabeth Jane Howard, *The Long View*.
[13] Heraclitus.
[14] Cratylus.

This was a novel taking place in the same location but somehow it was a completely different place every few decades. Towards the end, the narrator, who has mulled over the change he has witnessed, asks himself what a place really is: 'When does it stop becoming how you remember it? When its name changes? When it looks different? When it feels different? When you are no longer there?'[15]

I was not writing with plot at the forefront of my mind, I was dealing with themes and ideas embedded within the sequence of events. The river makes its appearance in every chapter, with a watery presence in the flowing and running of other things such as polluted drinking water, streams of blood, torrents of people and industry washing over the town. When it is not directly involved in the story, bridges cross its mass, ice and chemicals float in it, children swim across it, commerce floods the town, water floods the streets, the city is built over it and bodies are removed by it. It soaks into the wood of the violins and is drunk, pissed in and paper boats bob along its currents. For a moment, the river is personified and has its own point of view:

'The rain falls. And the river tastes the water which trickles down the mossy brickwork, down its rusty banks to join the flow. It remembers flavour of the green grass and the earthy tang of the changing crops. The sensation of the powdered oyster shell fertilizer carried downhill and washed into it. The feeling of a gentle hoof stepping in its shallow waters. Of eel gracefully mimicking its currents. It recalls looking up at the sight of the robin and blackbird's feet in winter as they daintily hop on the iced-over surface. The river remembers the laughing and muffled conversations of the farmhands and resting crofters cooling their feet and sitting in the sun.'[16]

Other things in the novel behave in a fluid manner; they flow, run, cascade, trickle, coarse, lap and bubble. Keith is perceived as: 'bobbing along amidst it all and somehow had to wade through the mud to get ashore.'[17] The old man sees himself in time as: 'still, but all around you it's flowing'[18]

[15] Adam Irving *A River.*
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

and comments that the river did not really exist because: 'It came from another place and went somewhere else.'[19]

If anything holds the novel together, it is the river. It had made itself a theme of its own accord. It flows not just through the city but also through the novel.

The fluidity of genre cropped up several times during the writing of the novel: 'Genre is almost a dirty word amongst creative writers. It seems to imply something derivative rather than organic, commercial rather than artistic.'[20] This quote continues to say that it must be remembered that genres are not static. During the workshops of the chapters, it was noted in both positive and negative ways, that my work didn't adhere to any existing genre. I took this as a compliment. I would rather the writing stood between genres than comfortably sit within one. Like the absence of name, some of the group were still unsettled and felt that they needed to know what genre it was, presumably in order to evaluate the text. It became, in several people's eyes, magic realism. They could now compare and contrast it with key novels of the genre such *as The Tin Drum* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I objected to issues with a label though. Once something is classed as a specific type, it then is judged by the standards of this classification. Like Ishiguro, I believe that: 'genre rules should be porous, if not non-existent.'[21] If I removed the narrator character from the novel, there is nothing about it, which could be described as magic realism. During discussions, we talked about books which were considered examples of this genre, such as Steven King's *The Green Mile*, but I found explanations unsatisfactory as to why other books, I.e. the majority of King's other novels, were not seen as magic realism. It was noted that normal occurrences combined with extraordinary circumstances were what made magic realism. It seemed that most readers wanted to know what the novel was in order to judge its attributes.

The group commented that the laws of time or physics did not seem to apply in the text and some, when their comfortable story arcs had been removed, were unsure what it was they were

[19] Ibid.
[20] Kim Wilkins. *The Process of Genre: Authors, Readers, Institutions.*
[21] Kazuo Ishiguro *Interview with The Guardian*

supposed to be following. I took this too as a positive attribute. I was not setting out to embed any specific moral or political message or plant any underlying belief or agenda in the reader's minds, but people seemed to prefer to consider the novel as magic realism and it was judged and critiqued within these parameters. Those who didn't mind what genre it was supposed to be simply commented on the fact they felt they were in 'good hands' wherever the story was taking them. It was this search for the story which fascinated me. I looked at how a story becomes one. 'A man is always a teller of stories,' claims Sartre: 'he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people. He sees everything that happens to him *in terms of* these stories and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.'[22] But this doesn't mean that our lives told as a story are entirely satisfying.

I found myself comparing the telling of a fiction to and the telling of a factual story. I observed the popular method of telling a real story; by beginning at the very end as the opening and then reaching back to the chronological start in order to work towards the ending, which the reader or viewer already knows. This method is regularly employed and can be seen in several biopics and books about events such as the *Titanic* or John Lennon's life. A number of John Lennon biographies/biopics begin in December 1980, detail Lennon's last hours before death as a prologue or introduction, then move back to 1940; birth, childhood, Beatles, 1970's and finally meet up with the 1980 murder. Likewise, documentaries on the *Titanic*, including the semi-fictionalized 1997 film begin with a narrator in the present day, move to underwater wreckage of the ship and then jump back to 1912 and work their way through the moments before and during the disaster. I was curious as to why this seemed to work. Was real life not satisfactory when told in chronological order? Was it because Lennon's life as a story was unsatisfactory and didn't adhere to a conventional story format; a young boy grows up in Liverpool, becomes a famous musician, does little for several years then is suddenly randomly killed? Would his life be more digestible told in episodic non-linear form in the way that *Get On Up,* the 2014 film about James Brown was? Would we be disappointed by the end of *Titanic* if it just sank at the end, as it did in real life? Surely if you are going to watch a biopic or read a

[22] Jean Paul Sartre, *Words.*

biography like this, you will already know the basics about the story before you begin. Would anyone really be shocked to find *Titanic* sinks or Lennon is murdered at the end? Were certain real life situations deemed bad stories because they did not have a beginning, middle and an end? Why do we seem to favour some formats and orders over others? When was a story not a story?

This is where the research began.

Section Two: The Theoretical

Hold your horses[23]

Before discussing why we seem prone to immerse ourselves in story, it is important to consider what we mean by story, as I am not solely referring to fiction. Story can be broadly defined as an account of real or imaginary people or events. Everybody has their own idea of what a story is though. On any given day, we exchange, read and listen to hundreds of stories without ever narrowing down any of the essential criteria. For most of the time it is common knowledge, and taken for granted what we mean by the term, no explanations are necessary.

However, when one person tells a story, the listener may interpret or infer a completely different narrative. The constructionist view is that stories do not just happen, they are created in people's minds. Paul Auster put it another way: 'stories only happen to those who are able to tell them.'[24]

The longer and more complex the story, as in the case of novels, the harder it becomes to pin down exactly where or what the story is. Only when trying to define precisely do we run into issues, as Sartre put it: 'all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated elude definition; only that which has no history is definable.'[25]

Trying to find the source of the word does not clarify the matter. The Latin roots of the word story lie in *histor*, meaning learned man, which became *historia* meaning narrate or discover. When we look at relatively recent terms such as *novel* and *fiction*, it becomes apparent that story has meant a number of different things in different places over the centuries. The standard form of a novel we all recognize today was once literally *novel*, in Latin *novus,* meaning new and had, over time been used to describe a piece of news, a new story or a novelty.

[23] Homer, *The Iliad,* Book 23.
[24] Paul Auster, New York Trilogy.
[25] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo.*

Storytelling predates written language. Before stories could be recorded in words, they existed only in the memories of those who told and listened to them. Evidence of verbal storytelling, being: 'the transmission by a teller of thoughts, desires, fantasies and memories, some vague and some hyper-specific, into an intensely organized linguistic structure,'[26] has been discovered in objects tens of thousands of years old, across the globe, in the form of the cave paintings at Chauvet and Lascaux, body tattoos or carvings in stone and papyrus. Archaeologists believe that some of these early images were pictorial aide-mémoire which served the purpose of recording a story and guiding a storyteller.

The idea of an author owning a story as their creation is a relatively new concept. A concept so engrained in our lives that it is hard to imagine a time when storytellers were valued not for what they told, but for how well they told a tale. Harvard folk tale scholar, Alfred Bates Lord discovered that ninety percent of oral stories were constructed from sets of phrases and patterns, which were accumulated by the storyteller over a lifetime.

Even when author's names are attached to works, the 21st century concept does not necessarily correspond to that of the 18th century one; when Robinson Crusoe was first published in 1719 it was credited as the work of *Robinson Crusoe*. Daniel Defoe's name was not mentioned in the publication and it was sold as a factual account. To modern standards, the omission of the name of the author would be seen as deceitful, the book was however, published in a time of what are now referred to as 'dubious histories,' each claiming to be a true and historic account of real events or locations. To 18th century readers, the concept of selling a story which had been created entirely by a single person was vague and without rules or conventions. Defoe's publishers would no doubt have struggled to sell a fabricated 'true account' in exactly the same way that Virginia Woolf struggled to get *Orlando,* a 'biography' of a fictional character stocked in bookshops when it was first published.

In *How To Read Literature*, Terry Eagleton describes an eighteenth century bishop who upon reading *Gulliver's Travels*, threw the book into the fire: 'indignantly declaring that he didn't believe a

[26] Karl Kroeber, Make Believe in Film and Fiction.

word of it. He obviously thought that the story was meant to be true, but suspected that it was invented. Which, of course, is just what it is. The bishop was dismissing the fiction because he thought it was fiction.'[27]

'Traditionally stories were stolen, as Chaucer stole his; or they were felt to be the common property of a culture or community.'[28] If the death of the author came with Barthes then the birth of the author came with the introduction of copyright laws and the commercial reader.

Our modern day concepts of fact and fiction are seldom doubted. Books are products, written by people, we have clearly divided sections in shops and libraries where everything has its own category. The earliest novels, with no clear idea of form do not follow conventions or rules of length and all grapple with the concept of what a novel is. The first novel written in Finnish, *Seven Brothers*, which the 1954 film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was based upon, is part script, part poetry and part what we now view as novel. It makes the reader wonder how someone could write a novel when he had no reference as to what a novel was.

The further back in time the reader delves, the vaguer the concepts become. The clearly defined areas of fable, myth, story and tale are all stripped of their 21st century clarity depending on which period or country you are referring to. Each generation of religious scholars take a fresh look at their primary sources, the Bible for example, and decide which parts they consider real and which parts metaphorical.

In his *Poetics,* Aristotle claims that we only learn from art by studying the plot, which he places all importance on. Plot in Greek is *mythos*. That is not to say that *mythos* means plot though. Aristotle's *mythos* refers to the 'essence' or 'spirit' of the work. In the same era, the Latin for myth is *fabula*, the root of the English Fable and in turn traced back to *fari* meaning to tell, which is logical as we are looking at an era before print when all stories were told. Definitions aside, whether referred to as narrative, stories or tales, our everyday language is so deeply engrained with them that we barely notice their existence. We casually say, 'don't cry wolf,' 'all that glitters,' 'out of the frying pan

[27] Terry Eagleton, *How To Read Literature*
[28] William Gass, *Habitations of the Word: Essays.*

into the fire,' and 'head into the lion's jaws,' without making any conscious effort to considering we are referencing a story which over the centuries has been worn down to a mere phrase. Most amazingly, when we speak in these condensed stories, we are understood. We converse and paint pictures in conversation with a stockpile of abbreviated tales.

Sometimes these phrases are popularized by translations of the Bible such as: 'lamb to the slaughter,' 'the skin of my teeth,' 'a man after my own heart,' 'a leopard changing its spots,' and 'forbidden fruit' for example. This does not mean to say the Bible coined these phrases though. The translations utilized phrases common to the period, including some of Aesop's, such as the 1611 King James translation Matthew 7:15: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.'[29]

Foucault believed that:

'the frontiers of a book are never clear cut; beyond the title, the first lines and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences; it is a node within a network.'[30]

The answers to exact origins of tales can never be clearly resolved. It seems there are a large number of intertextual plots out of which all the stories we know today are woven from. There are at least twelve of Aesop's fables which bear similarities with the Buddhist *Jataka Tales* and the Hindu Sanskrit *Panchantra*. Aesop[31] and Buddha both lived in the same period and it is unclear if the Greeks learned the tales from Indian storytellers or vice versa. We can only assume that these tales and fables were in common use at the time. Likewise, the Qu'ran and Bible each share dozens of narratives; Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Joseph and Moses narratives appear in very similar forms in the religious canon: 'Without the existence of stories that diverge from the true, religion could not have arisen. Religion depends on the power of story.'[32]

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[29] *King James Bible.*
[30] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge.*
[31] I won't get distracted by becoming involved in the debate on whether Aesop, Homer or Jesus actually existed. They have achieved a literary immortality as characters or authors of their own story.
[32] Brian Boyd, *On the Origin Of Stories.*

Folklorists often divide stories into two categories; *Märchen* and *Sagen*. With no literal translations from German, *Märchen* is best summed up as tales of fantasy (fairy tales) in which the supernatural occurs and the characters are present merely to propel the events. *Sagen* or 'legends', would consist of tales which are told as if they had at one time happened. Religious books such as the Bible can however, be seen to fall into both categories.

The further we dig back through time, the harder it becomes to determine both where stories originated from and what purpose they served. When we look at surviving narratives such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* or *Mahabharata*, what becomes blatantly clear is that the human race is riddled with storytelling. Just as we have evolved from constructing wattle and daub houses to wooden ones, from wooden to stone and from stone to manmade bricks and steel, could it be that we have also honed and refined our collective storytelling skills through the centuries and that the simple fable has become the novel, the saga morphed into the soap opera? Jeanette Winterson, when commenting on the ever changing form of the novel, claims that: 'if prose fiction is to survive, it will have to do more than tell a story […] in so much as television and film have largely occupied the narrative function of the novel, just as the novel annexed the narrative function of epic poetry, fiction will have to move on and find new territory of its own.'[33]

In our everyday lives, we are all deeply involved in listening, discussing, watching and reading stories. In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall lists a number of things which he considers as story; music, films, boxing match hype, wrestling matches, dreams, stand-up comedy, video games, conspiracy theories, Facebook and Twitter messages. Here I would disagree with some of his choices. Although many of the things listed above contain elements of narrative, wrestling matches and stand-up comedy for example, they are not in themselves stories as their primary purpose, that is to say we cannot consider all songs with lyrics as being stories in their own right just because words are

[33] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery.*

involved. There are vast numbers of songs with lyrics that mean absolutely nothing and are in no way stories[34]

By story, I am referring to the narrative recounting of events, which in my definition would include news, gossip, autobiography, biography, fiction, and several other more ambiguous stops in between which I will come to. As the narrator in *Life of Pi* states: 'Doesn't the telling of something always become a story?'[35]

This is key; you may interpret a story in a stream of twitter messages or Facebook posts, but only in the same way you interpret a cup of tea from a kettle, empty cup and a teabag. Those three objects are not in themselves a cup of tea. They need an 'author' to make them into a hot beverage. Otherwise, they exist only in the imagination of the onlooker; to a cold homeless person on a winter night, they are a cup of tea, to someone who doesn't like tea, they are one item short of a cup of coffee.

Once Upon a time, despite being a sentence which for the young, signals: 'the suspension of the rules of the real,'[36] carries with it the assumption that what follows *actually happened*, albeit not recently, but at some point in the past. It is a universal opening phrase to a story and differs subtlety in languages ; *A very, very long time ago* (Chinese), *A long time ago* (Indonesian), *I remember something that my father told me and that is this* (Iraqi) and *In some kingdom, in some land, there lived* (Russian), which all imply the following tale occurred. There are only a small number of languages such as Armenian, Turkish and Czech, which state, *there once was or there once wasn't*, which hint subtly that the story is not true. This is perfectly logical when referring to a story told in a time when there was no division between fact and fiction. If life was short and hard, why waste time on something that isn't true? Although the 21st century is awash with fictional narratives, would you

[34] The first three songs I heard on the radio after writing this were *I Am The Walrus* by The Beatles, *Wonderwall* by Oasis and *Losing My Religion* by REM, all perfect examples of songs with lyrics which the respective writers have each gone on record stating that the songs were meaningless.
[35] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi.*
[36] Brian Boyd, *On The Origin Of Stories.*

invest any time or interest listening to a family member tell you about the exploits of an imaginary friend of theirs?

Stepping away from definitions, I want to consider the frequency in which we tell stories. Before the second paragraph of this document was over, I had told one; the diggers, the pit, the discovery. Then this story became part of a larger story; the novel. I could have just said I had an encounter when I was a child which began a chain of thought about how we perceive the past, history and permanence, but it's highly unlikely that would have made the point or even been recalled by the reader several pages later.

Gotschall succinctly sums up this human obsession in the opening of *The Storytelling Animal*: 'Humans are addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night telling itself stories.'[37]

Researchers are always quick to mention the main reason we find stories so fascinating is Theory of Mind. *ToM* is the ability to imagine what others believe, know or pretend to know in order to make predictions on events. These are conclusions drawn from speech, body language, behaviour or overall knowledge of a given situation. We don't just use this when processing the plot of a complex detective novel or laughing over a farcical sitcom (in which we use this mindreading technique to comprehend that A thinks B has told C something so will misinform D who will in turn get in another embarrassing situation with A), we continually use it. It's in operation when we talk, argue and even when navigating through busy traffic; *this driver has seen me but is pretending not to, if I pull out now they'll have to acknowledge me and let me out* etc. Our *ToM* is in constant use, it's second nature and amazingly fast.

My girlfriend was once involved in an armed robbery. She was in a petrol station when two masked men with guns burst in, told everyone to lie on the floor while they made the cashier open the till. A police car happened to pull up outside and everyone's *ToM* went into overdrive. Everybody would have rifled through all possible permutations, changing their minds back and forth, as the

[37] Jonathan Gottschall, *On The Origin of Stories.*

events unfolded. The cashier, to avoid shooting breaking out, actually warned the robbers about the police. The robbers told everyone to stand up and act normal. The shoppers were all, most probably weighing up their options in what would happen if they attempted to tackle the robbers, run, shout a warning or stay quiet and let the robbery happen. The robber's minds likewise would have whizzed through the options of what the others were thinking, the probability of any of them doing something out of the ordinary, fleeing, all while weighing up the chances of being confronted and prison sentences for armed robbery versus attempted armed robbery.

They took off their masks and pretended to look at crisps and chocolates as two police officers entered and bought coffees from a vending machine. The robbers might at this point have been planning an escape route or checking the cameras to see if their faces were being captured on film. What happened was this; as the police officers were waiting for their coffees to be dispensed, one of the customers said "Hi Mike, is Cathy alright now?" and the police officer replied, "Oh Hi Lisa, didn't notice you there, yeah, she'll be back at work in a couple of weeks."

The police left with their coffees, the robbers took the money and left without hurting anyone. They were caught a few minutes later. They were caught because of *ToM*. Neither of the police officers were called Mike and likewise, the woman wasn't called Lisa. Even Cathy, the person they each discussed, was imaginary. The police officers would probably call *ToM* 'a hunch,' 'instinct,' or 'a feeling that something isn't quite right.' As soon as one of them was greeted by a person they didn't know and asked about a person who didn't exist, they drew many conclusions; that this person was talking to them for a reason, that there was danger present and a danger which couldn't be brought to their attention. In a millisecond, the other police officer, aware that this colleague was now responding to a name which was not his own, his own *ToM* now in turbo, came to precisely the same conclusion. The thieves, who didn't know anyone's name had no reason to suspect anything and didn't consider the possibility that the conversation had been fake.

Both police drew the same conclusions, said goodbye, walked outside and called for backup. A few minutes later both the men were arrested as they made their getaway, unaware that the alarm

had been signalled before they had even taken the money. This kind of thought process goes on in our every waking hour, so much so that we are not even aware it is happening.

An example resembling this tale is usually quoted to add weight to the theory that story is an ancient form of survival. The example typically involves a caveman in danger, being forced to reveal where his winter food store is hidden and in turn making up a believable excuse, a story so robust and plausible it would bear scrutiny and would explain what happened to the stash of food and thus mean he avoided it being stolen and survived through the winter.

Although evolution and survival can be seen as being part of an explanation as to how *ToM* and stories helped mankind avoid conflict and live to reproduce, it cannot be the only answer. There are a multitude of other factors involved in evolution. Language and actions stand amongst a number of other facets, which have assisted mankind to evolve into our present state. In my opinion, we have not evolved into a highly sophisticated species, able to think our way out of dangerous situations. As a species, the majority of the planet is still embroiled in the same conflicts, which our ancestors from thousands of years were. The planet may have become filled with fancy objects we have created, but our minds have changed very little; a theme which no doubt rears its head in my novel as the Seller family falls into the same mental routines in each generation.

What is important, I believe, is that *ToM* feeds into other areas and as time passes we use the vast storehouse of our memories to change our opinions and build new ones. Boyd highlights the fact that: 'our capacities to comprehend events and to recall and reconfigure them in memory develop naturally and to a considerable extent without language. We retain episodic memories partly so we can re-evaluate past incidents if we encounter new information that challenges our evaluations and perhaps revue our understanding of this part of the past.'[38]

We do this instantly too. To make this point, the story about my girlfriend and the petrol station robbery was complete fiction. No part of it actually happened. Before you even finished reading that sentence, your mind would have automatically decided if I were in fact, telling the truth

[38] Brian Boyd, *On The Origin of Stories.*

now or previously, arrived at a decision, then no doubt removed the petrol station story from the place in your memory in which you store factual anecdotes and relocated it in the fiction section. If you happened to know my girlfriend's name and later see a newspaper article reporting the crime and mentioning her, you would again immediately re-evaluate and refile the story back under factual memories. In this respect, it is not *ToM* alone which has aided our survival but other areas of our thought processes and memory.

Moving ahead with a genuine real story, assuming you will believe anything I say now; I was once hit by a car and woke up in an ambulance. I can clearly remember the strangeness of having a chunk of time missing from my memory, namely that specific day. The paramedic asked my name, address, date of birth and where I was going. I happily reeled off the first three and then answered that I must have been going to college because I could see my rucksack in the ambulance. My mind could not handle the lack of basic information so began automatically filling in the missing parts based upon the available evidence. He asked again, not where I *thought* I was going, but what I actually remembered. I didn't know, but my mind decided it would fill in those parts on my behalf and I replied that I must have been hit by a car because I normally cycle along the dual carriageway in rush hour going to college. By the time he asked me a third time my mind had decided that this explanation sounded pretty convincing and almost had *me* believing a memory it had just created. I didn't remember the events of that morning, however, I still have no idea what colour or make the vehicle that hit me was.

Experiments with people who have had the left and right hemispheres of their brain separated show that when information is delivered to the right hemisphere, the left hemisphere attempts to craft explanations for behaviour initiated by the isolated right hemisphere. In one such experiment the subjects left eye received an instruction to stand up. The subject did, but when asked why she done so, responded, using the language part of her left hemisphere, which had no knowledge of the instruction, that she wanted a drink.[39]

[39] Hilary Hochman, *Of A divided Mind: Human Responses to the Human Split Brain.*

The mind is: 'allergic to uncertainty, randomness and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world it will impose them.'[40]

'There are only patterns, patterns on top of patterns, patterns that affect other patterns. Patterns hidden by patterns. Patterns within patterns. If you watch close, history does nothing but repeat itself. What we call chaos is just patterns we haven't recognized. What we call random is just patterns we can't decipher. What we can't understand we call nonsense.'[41]

One of the few things researchers all seem to agree on is that stories are essential to a child's development. There has been an exhausting amount of studies on IQ, relationship building, learning, interaction and language acquisition in children, but as we move away from childhood, less relevance has been placed on the importance of story in studies.

'Childhood play and storytelling for all ages engages our attention so compulsively through our interest in event comprehension and social monitoring that over time their concentrated information patterns develop our facility for complex situational thought.'[42]

Narrative Medicine is a relatively new concept. It places value in stories, from patients, physicians or metanarratives involving several parties and is used for a variety of outcomes; the understanding of patient expectations, informing medical professionals, encouraging empathy and understanding between clinicians and patients, as a form of therapy, helping patients understand or cope with their illness in relation to their own life story and to challenge preconceptions and generate new hypothesis. Although few people, even within the medical profession will claim to have heard of Narrative Medicine, there are numerous examples of articles and case stories breaking into the mainstream; The popular television series *ER*'s, writers were coached by experts on real case studies and another television series, *House* based many of its episodes on the medical articles of Berton Roueché, whose case studies appeared in the New Yorker magazine for over four decades. In the literary field, Oliver Sacks, author of *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, has published a

[40] Jonathan Gottshall, *The Storytelling Animal.*
[41] Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*.
[42] Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories.*

number of bestselling non-fiction books of case studies on his patients, so much so he has been accused of exploiting them and even being dubbed: 'the man who mistook his patients for a literary career'[43]

Narrative Medicine is embraced by many because the story of a real person's life is always more memorable than a list of symptoms.

'We're fooling ourselves if we think we communicate by bursts of information. We live for stories. Stories over and over…they comfort us, arouse us, they excite and educate us.'[44]

Behavioural psychologist Susan Weinschenk explains that if she were to give a presentation on the global economy with the audience attached to fMRI (Functional magnetic resonance imaging) machines, their brains auditory cortex would be active along with Wernicke's area, the part of the brain where words are processed. If she began to add elements of story to the presentation, describing a family in South America who were affected by changes in the global economy, including details such as a father going to work in a foreign country so he could earn enough money for the family or the mother having to drive a hundred miles for health care, things would be different. In the presentation with narrative:

'the Wernicke's area would be active again, as well as the same auditory or visual cortices, but now there's more activity. We would see many other parts of your brain light up. If, in my story, I described the sharp smell of the pine forest high in the Andes where this family lives, the olfactory areas of your brain would be active too, as though you were smelling the forest. If I described the mother driving over rutted muddy roads, with the vehicle careering from side to side, your motor cortex would be lighting up as though you were driving on a bumpy road.'[45]

What is again clear is that we instinctively respond to stories no matter how they are told, more than we respond to lists of facts and statistics. One of the key figures in Narrative medicine, Rita Charon claims that:

[43] Tom Shakespeare, *Disability and Society*.
[44] Mary Lawrence, *Nieman Reports* Spring 2004.
[45] Jessica Stillman, *This is Your Brain on Good Storytelling.*

'not unlike the act of reading literature, acts of diagnostic listening enlist the listener's interior resources; memories, associations, curiosities, creativity, interpretative powers, allusions to other stories told by this teller and others to identify meaning.[46]'

Although we do learn from reading and from language, stories:

'open our imagination to concepts and ideas unfettered by trying to decipher and interpret the printed word. By creating images in the listener's mind, storytelling helps a student experience and look at the world in a much deeper way. Storytelling gives meaning to science concepts by opening a child's mind, arousing curiosity and encouraging a willingness to explore all possibilities.'[47]

Narrative in adulthood seems to be overlooked or at least undervalued, as if stories are just a thing for children. It is evident that the same processes are occurring in all ages though. Brains begin their life by:

'generating in infants, more neural connections than they need, then testing them by experience, strengthening those interconnections that have been used and killing off those that have not. New experience then tests these new connection networks and alters their strengths and new experience again alters these strengths in a repetition of the cycle that lasts as long as the brain functions'[48]

When we read, a multitude of things occur in our brains. Other than associations to memories and other narratives, fact, fiction or *ToM*, mirror neurones begin to fire. Mirror neurones cause our brain to respond to the text as it would to real events. So, if we read of excruciating pain being described as a fictional character has their ankle bone snapped, mirror neurones fire, albeit on a much smaller scale, in the same part of the brain they would if it were our own tibia splintering into jagged shards and the sharp pieces tearing outwards through the skin of our leg.

As we continue to read, a neurochemical called Cortisol is released. Cortisol focuses our attention and is more commonly linked to fear. This is logical in an evolutionary sense; the mind

[46] Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine. A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust.*
[47] Judy Sima, *Storytelling and Science, What a Concept.*
[48] Brian Boyd, *On The Origin of Stories.*

focuses attention in order to avoid risk or danger. The more a story engages us, the more cortisol we create. Along with Cortisol, another a hormone called Oxytocin is produced. This hormone is usually associated with care, trust and cooperation; it also enhances our sense of empathy. When we read an absorbing story, our bodies levels of Oxytocin increase.

Oxytocin is more commonly known as the 'cuddle chemical' as it is released by breastfeeding mothers in their milk and is an important hormone in human bonding; its discovery supports those who claim that storytelling is key to forming human's sense of social cohesion. The connection between the seemingly unrelated areas of breastfeeding hormones and enjoying a good novel, like our understanding of the human brain, is yet to be fully understood. This particular story will be very long and complicated and we are still only in its first chapter.

As unlikely as it may seem, if we take a detour along the route of social cohesion and mix in elements of ownership and closure as seen in Narrative Medicine, we somehow find ourselves in the world of gossip. When conversing with friends and family we tell stories, many of which can be classed as gossip. I am going to generalize a little and assume that only a tiny percentage of gossip exchange is made up a of a single unrelated fact, the vast majority or gossip is stories or exchange of information which leads to an exchange of stories; "Have you heard what happened to..?" or "You know why she won't be coming out tonight don't you?"

'Anyone who has obeyed nature by transmitting a piece of gossip experiences the explosive relief that accompanies the satisfying of a primary need'.[49]

Robin Dunbar claims that our desire to gossip is rooted in bonding and social cohesion. He claims we use language in four ways, firstly to seek advice or to discuss hypothetical situations, secondly to provide a policing function to control those who fail to stick to the rules of society, thirdly to advertise ourselves and lastly to deceive by telling others what we think it would help *us* for them to know.

[49] Primo Levi, *La Stampa.*

'It is perhaps important to appreciate that, although we can use language in all of these ways and possibly more, all of them are really derivative of the fact that language evolved to allow us to bond large social groups. None of these additional functions would really be relevant (or so intrusive) if we did not first live in large groups. In contrast, without language as a means of exchanging information about the social network, large groups could not be kept together as viable, coherent social entities. So although we may use language to deceive or police , the possibility of being able to use it in this way would not exist without there being large groups in the first place'[50]

Elwin Hofman, in a study of gossip in an eighteenth century Flemish town found that gossip was used as social control in different ways: 'by reinforcing social norms; punishing violators of these norms, publicising the punishments of these deviants, creating fear of violating norms and by spreading information about improper behaviour, leading to other sanctions.'[51]

Gossip can also be seen as a currency, in which the source of news or information can attain status.

'In conversation, we do not typically offer information to others in the hope that they will eventually offer us something in return. Instead, we often seek status through what we say, according to its relevance and value to others. We may impart information in conversation less as a service than in order to be accorded status by listeners; we 'reward' one another in the currency of status'[52]

In 2007, a few days after the newspapers began covering the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, a curious event occurred in my workplace. A colleague sitting close to my desk answered the telephone, said, "Are you absolutely sure?" put the phone, stood up and shouted to the fifty people in the office, "The little girl has been found safe and sound."

This interests me now because it covers three areas. Firstly, everyone had been reading the daily front page 'updates' which brought no news and they were all now relieved because the 'story'

[50] Robin Dunbar, *Gossip in Evolutionary Perspective.*
[51] Elwin Hofman, *An Obligation of Conscience: Gossip as Social Control in an eighteenth century Flemish Town*
[52] Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories.*

was over. Second, because the woman in question was so eager to deliver and be the first to claim or break the news for social status (i.e. she didn't tell everyone because she was worried about their mental wellbeing from worrying about the plight of the missing girl) and thirdly, because the declaration was completely wrong, resulting in the woman in question not coming into work for the next few days out of sheer embarrassment and now transforming this moment, into a story I can relay. Had the news been true, my anecdote of this moment would be worthless as it wouldn't be an interesting story.

More recently, I witnessed a similar situation, which displayed how people viewed new coverage of events which had no connection to their own lives. I was sitting in a café shortly after the two *Charlie Hebdo* gunmen were killed. Two men beside me read the front page of the newspaper together which laid out the timeline of the events. One said, "Well that's over then," then turned the page and said, "Hey, have you seen this story?"

It is not just that we think of a beginning, middle and end to fiction; we understand time passing and real events in the same way until they become stories. These same two men went on to discuss their lack of interest in the situation in the Middle East. To them it was a story with no end, fighting which has been occurring for centuries and for those not directly affected by the fighting, difficult to comprehend as any kind of narrative because it was ongoing.

'We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others. The so-called facts of our individual worlds are highly coloured and arbitrary, facts that fit whatever reality we have chosen to believe in […] it may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can.'[53]

The news therefore, can sometimes be seen as less satisfying than a conventional story specifically because it is *not* a story and is often random and directionless. Jean Paul Sartre writes in *Nausea:*

[53] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery.*

'Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. For an occurrence to become an adventure, it is necessary and sufficient for one to recount it.'[54]

Again and again we run into the suggestion that there may be no such thing as story. Again, we have to ask ourselves what a story is, why we are telling it and where it begins and ends. When it comes to soap operas, the very absence of an ending is what drives the narrative forwards. A soap opera:

'lacks dramatic structure because while it has a beginning and a middle it has no end, only a termination when audience interest gives out. It isn't going anywhere in particular, and the importance of end, its effect upon a play which has it, is nowhere clearer than in the endless serial. The serial contains, certainly, short plot structures or episodes, running for a month or two, and these are constructed normally of complications and denouement. But there is a curious fact about them. The writer is presumably at pains to avoid any moment of finality, any sense of conclusion which will invite his audience to have done with these characters. At any rate, these episodes are likely to overlap, complications of a new one building up at the same time that the old one is being unravelled, so that attention is diverted from the conclusion, which is weakened and seems flat. Suspense is constant; it is never effectively released'[55]

A story with a perpetual middle? The story of stories involves many dead ends or paths which lead back to the same subject. But maybe this is because we think everything is a story when it is not.

'It was a long story and like most of the stories in the world, never finished. There was an ending – there always is – but the story went on past the ending – it always does.'[56]

It would seem that linguists, writers and literary theorists each follow their own paths in breaking down stories to their elements or defining, grouping and translating meaning and purpose.

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[54] Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea.*
[55] Dean, Fry. *Reading Shakespeare Backwards*
[56] Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping.*

During my research, I found the area of police witness statements to be of particular interest as it is an area where narrative is of central importance but where there is no artistic or aesthetic merit or value.

Just as Aristotle, when referring to tragedy, believed that every plot must have a beginning middle and an end, police witness statements not only adhere to this form but lay down strict rules of length, content and format, something that no other area or scholar, other than Aristotle, has ever been able to. In Aristotle's view, the three parts are the incentive moment; the start of the chain not dependent on anything outside of the play, the climax; caused by earlier incidents and itself the cause of final stage of resolution; this must be caused by the preceding events but not lead to any other event beyond the play. In police witness statements, this is referred to as *Narrative Partition*, where the focus on the beginning, middle and end is 20-25% Prologue, 40-60% Critical event and 25-35% aftermath. This three-part form is something seemingly universally accepted as a story. It is what a child would tell you if you asked them to describe what made up a story. Centuries after Aristotle, Jean Luc Godard is reported to have said that a story should have a beginning, middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.

The tri-part form is even applied to the field of magic. In *Confessions of a Conjurer*, illusionist Derren Brown refers to all magic as being a story in which every trick has a beginning middle and end; establish, invite attention and surprise: 'a trick is a three piece story,'[57] of premise, struggle and resolution.

It would seem no matter which angle we hit the subject of why we find stories so addictive, backtracking and repetition occur; for Brown, both Storytelling and *ToM* are the heart of his act. Virtually all his tricks are prefaced with a story, often told as real but most probably fiction, about the origin of the trick he is about to perform, serving as a prelude or distraction to the trick itself, which in his own words, is regarded as a story. Clear parallels can be drawn between magic and storytelling, as the audience or reader, in both fiction and magic are suspending their belief temporarily. We know

[57] Derren Brown, *Confessions of a Conjurer*.

that what occurs during a novel or a magic trick is not real but are prepared to contemplate the possibility that it is.

With police witness statements, unless you work in this field, it is generally assumed that the creative elements are absent and that the story has been stripped to a skeleton form of facts alone. Aside from the fact that witness narrators: 'reinterpret events in light of their own emotional and social experiences, linguistically reconstructing reality to create meaning as they perceive it to be,'[58] the construction of a witness statement is not a simple matter of a person giving their account and the words being committed to record. 'There are basic differences between spoken language, which represents reality as a process and written language, which represents language as an object.'[59]

In *Genesis of a Witness Statement*, Frances Rock details the elaborate process of the stages involved in creating the text which begin with the witness narrative, the co-construction (which resembles an interview with note taking), a third stage of note checking or clarifying and a final stage of construction in which each sentence is shaped and discussed, before being committed to record. Rock states that:

'a tremendous amount of interactional currency is present in the production of a Witness Statement. The collapsing of interviewing, note-taking, composing and so on makes the process of obtaining a Witness Statement and the product, the statement itself, quite unique.'[60]

A simple sentence such as "I came out of the house at 10am," may have begun with the witness not knowing the time at all and then through a series of deductions and questions (what time did you get the train, how long does it take to get to the station from your home etc.) the time is eventually agreed upon.

To me, this process sounds like my grandmother trying to recall something from scraps of episodic memory; "your cousin wasn't married then and they were still living in Rossendale so it was

[58] Isabel Picornell, *Analysing Deception in Written Witness Statements.*

[59] Ibid.

[60] Rock, Frances, *The Genesis of a Witness Statement.*

before 1986 and we didn't have the car until 1982, Cyril was dead so it was after 1983…" Hardly the most scientific ways of constructing a version of events.

Rock's report highlights the fact that the events described in the initial statement are wildly different to the final official record, which is ultimately a co-authored text, written over a period of days or weeks, rewritten, clarified and polished in order for it to be a definitive account and used in court.

During this process, the interviewer will also be looking out for linguistic clues that facts are being concealed in the form of slips in how the story is told. This could be signalled by lapsing from past tense into present, which often suggest that the present tense sections have been embellished or invented; such as 'I left the office, I got to my car and this guy jumps out, puts a gun in my face and takes my wallet, I drove straight home and called 999.'

Other signals such as removing personal links to an event or avoiding personal pronouns such as 'I' or 'My,' again may suggest the person, rather than straightforward lying is distancing themselves from the area they wish to lie about.

'Deconstructing narratives down into their constituent episodes and linguistically tracking the changing interaction of cues exposes subtle changes in the linguistic gradient of statements, and enables the identification of linguistic strategies associated with deception.'[61]

As interesting as this is, it doesn't exactly tally with the claim that stories evolved from an evolutionary defence mechanism. How can it be that this ancient human skill has still not been mastered and can be so easily detected? At this point, it seems that there are branches of types of story, each one with its own offshoot of smaller branches of reasons we may tell it, but like an Escher image, some of these branches contort and connect back to others. Or maybe, because it so difficult to categorize and define, there is no such thing as a story, that like art, it has no single definition.

[61] Isabel Picornell, *Analysing Deception in Written Witness Statements.*

'Why can't you just tell me the story without starting with another story,' asks a character in Jeanette Winterson's *Lighthousekeeping*. The response is: 'because there's no story that's the start of itself any more than a child comes into the world without parents.'[62]

This seems especially true when investigating the story of stories, of which myth must surely be considered the most ancient and continuously used kind.

In his study on Amerindian myth, *The Raw and the Cooked*, Levi-Strauss concluded that myths could not be understood in isolation, but had to be considered a part of a larger myth system. Every culture has its own series of myths. Some are widely acknowledged to be 'just stories,' and not true. Others, to be found in every religion, end up being revered as absolute truth and ultimately spark an immeasurable amount of human suffering and wars across the planet. It seems the debate over where a mere story is real or not is still one of the hottest debates on earth.

Myths are not just stories from the past. They are created all the time and change as time passes. We may no longer be fooled by mysterious creatures in the dark woods, but we are still just as susceptible to stories of Moon landing conspiracies, psychopathic axe murderers or hidden messages in backwards playing records. It may or may not have been Mark Twain who first said, 'Never let the truth stand in the way of a good story,' but it is amusing that the origins of this oft quoted sentence are lost in the mists of myth and time. It's a good quote, who cares who said it?

This seems to be an underlying sentiment of myths themselves; the necessity to tell a story with little regard for the facts? Although many may doubt the authenticity of modern day urban myths, even the seemingly ridiculous urban legend kinds, which sound like they are plots from trashy 1950's films; the serial killer hiding in the back seat of the car, the person who woke up without a kidney etc., have arisen from some kind of factual origin.

'As a story is told and retold, the action of the minor characters are eventually attributed to the major characters…Stories with more characters typically have stayed in the oral pipeline a shorter time than stories with fewer characters, which have been distilled down to the essentials…The

[62] Jeanette Winterson, *Lighthousekeeping*.

attributes and actions of a class of beings may be represented as a single individual portrayed as a King or Queen of the group.'[63]

The same occurs in the present day; things are told and retold, quoted, posted online, so inevitably, a sort of Chinese whisper effect begins to take place. Coupled with the human obsession of wanting to tell stories, somewhere along the line, the facts begin to alter, become embellished, until the story, consciously or unconsciously has been rewritten.

'They are grounded in some reality, yet careful historical research has revealed them to be far from accurate'[64]

This does not stop them being told and retold in newspaper, on televisions, the internet and in books. I remember at school, being taught that the 'Fuck You' V-sign originated at the battle of Agincourt when French chopped off the first two fingers of all captured English archers to prevent them firing their longbows and sent them back to England. The image conjured up, was of ships full of English returning to France, the French unconcerned as they believed there were no Archers left and then, when the ships got close enough and it was too late, they saw scores of newly trained English archers, hands raised, taunting them with the V-sign; a signal they were about to slaughter them all. It's a great story which, aside from the fact that historians have repeatedly stated contains no element of truth, is still commonly told as true. The tale quickly paints a picture of a medieval war which sticks in a person's mind more than a series of dates and names. It also seems to be a story designed to summon a sense of national pride, an inspiring patriotic tale you can imagine being told to soldiers before battle with a moral of never giving up or being defeated. During times of conflict like war, stories like this flourish. But even without any particular need or purpose, myths persist; there is no record of Julius Caesar being born by Caesarian section which was supposedly named in his honor for example, some myths are uncontrollable.

There are a number of interesting passages in Sartre's *War Journals*, which otherwise chronicle his uneventful time in the Army as a meteorologist during the Second World War, which

[63] Elizabeth & Paul Barber, *When They Severed the Earth From the Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth.*
[64] J. Waller, *Fabulous Science: Fact and Fiction in the History of Scientific Discovery*.

record stories he has just heard. The tales consist of things like the French soldier who is captured by German soldiers, interrogated and then set free, the Germans warning a French village they are about to attack so they can flee, or the tale of French solider asked to shoot a German across the Rhine who refuses because he doesn't want to shoot another man and his officer instructing a second solider to fire at the same time so neither man will know which shot had killed the German.

The events are recounted as true by Sartre's colleagues and immediately retold by others. Sartre dismisses them all because nobody can ever state where the story has originated and when one man swears the story had actually happened to his friend, says he cannot name the man for safety reasons:

'The fact is *people* are recounting it – for he has certainly got it from someone else, who has got it from someone else, etc.'[65]

These kind of stories endure, not because they are true but because they are good stories, fitting the moment in which they are being told. People would rather believe them than dissect them to discover they are untrue. Philip Pullman, asked in an interview why stories were important, replied: 'After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.'[66] If the story is good, we just don't care where it comes from or if it's true.

Take the story the rabies vaccine. Before 1885, rabies killed most people who became infected with it. Louise Pasteur and Emile Roux developed a vaccine which meant those inoculated did not die when infected. These are the bare bones facts. This was a breakthrough in the field of medicine, but doesn't mean it's a particularly memorable story. Add some more details and a better story emerges: Nine year old Joseph Meister, who had been mauled by a rabid dog, was brought to Pasteur who, risking prosecution for practising medicine without a licence, treated him using an untested version of the vaccine. The treatment worked and Meister lived. When he grew up, Meister was employed as a caretaker at the Pasteur Institute. In June 1940, the German army invaded Paris, Meister shot himself, rather than allow the Wehrmacht enter Pasteur's crypt.

[65] Jean Paul Sartre, *War Journals.*
[66] Philip Pullman, *Interview with Scholastic book club.*

The last sentence is widely reported as fact but is in fact pure fiction. What actually happened was Meister, gassed himself, not because the German Army was trying to break into the Pasteur crypt but because he had sent his family away and believed them to be dead. They returned the day he killed himself.

The real version of events, although gripping, is a lot less gripping than the image of him protecting the crypt from the Nazis, with the added echo that the man who saved his life was ultimately involved in ending it. Had we been living in an oral world, this story would no doubt have distorted even more as time passed and end up, generations later as a brilliant myth.

The ancient myths of different cultures stand as their collective shared past and sense of identity which slowly undulate and ripple through history. An old narrative gets adopted by a new culture and then:

'the new narrative will necessarily function differently when inserted into one cultural than when it is inserted into a second distinct cultural tradition. In fact, to be precise, every narrative functions uniquely in every individual consciousness. But because specific individuals within a particular culture will tend to have a similar fund of memories, the individuals within that culture can be expected to have comparable reactions. When they do not, this is an indication of a variance on tradition or in environment that is creating the individual reaction and could be the point at which one cultural tradition splits in two or several.'[67]

This sounds like Pan is referring more to religion than he is to narrative. But religions depend on narrative more than most people would like to acknowledge. Religion, being:

'an *elaborate set* of beliefs in and behaviours toward beings with no reality outside the *minds* of *particular human believers*, and *art*, an *elaborate set* of *practices designed* to *appeal only* to *human preferences*, *might equally seem* 'ornaments' in our species. Others have suggested that religion is adaptation.'[68]

[67] David Pan. *J.G. Herder, the Origin of Language, and the Possibility of Transcultural Narratives, Language and Intercultural Communication.*
[68] Brian Boyd, *On The Origin of Stories.*

This sound more like Boyd is referring to stories.

Narrative is: 'one tool and a major one, which individuals develop from their culture and, in so doing, become a part of the collective culture.'[69] The sharing of stories is: 'a bonding ritual that breaks through illusions of separateness and activates a deep sense of our collective interdependence.' [70]

Creation myths all try to explain the origins of things, how the world was created and why things are as they are, but do it in a way that has little regard for truth. The emphasis in myths is on narrative and morals. We are a very strange species; satisfied that cats are just cats, which scratch when angry and purr when content, end of story. But when it comes to humans, we feel the need to spin elaborate yarns involving floods, arks and women being created from ribs to imply that everything has a purpose or meaning.

Theories of how stories came to exist and why they are still present in the 21st century all tend to use simple, easy to digest examples to support their hypothesis; cavemen lying to survive or African griots heading a community because of their wealth of knowledge. It is apparent that events, factual or otherwise, have a greater impact when told in narrative form.

I began to wonder where texts such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* fitted into the various theories on narrative. Rudyard Kipling reportedly said that if history was taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten. But is Frank's diary history, story or neither?

The book is undoubtedly the bestselling account of life during Second World War ever published. It has been translated into over seventy languages and sold in excess of thirty million copies worldwide. Its text has been selectively used as a tool to promote anti-war causes, Jewish, Christian, lesbian and feminist causes. It has been interpreted, sanitized for film, theatre and American schools (with sexual and religious references toned down) and even used to back the agendas of holocaust deniers who claim the book is a total fabrication and simply Zionistic propaganda. But why was it so enduring? As a story, it isn't even complete. It begins suddenly and

[69] Jim Fuller, *In Search of Knowledge about Narrative.*
[70] Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence and Persuasions through the Art of Storytelling.*

the ending is absent, existing in an eerie void known to the reader but not the author. The missing ending is neither pleasant nor satisfying. It is not a novel, nor is it a private diary; it was rewritten by Frank herself with the intention of being published after the war and subsequently edited and shaped from different versions of the text by Otto Frank.

Is the text driven by the thoughts of the author; poignant for children because it is written by a young girl, but just as moving for adults too? Narratively, it is an impenetrable reasonless story, a record of a bleak moment, a statement on the power of the written word, which captures a girl's faith in Judaism and human nature despite being written in a time of humane atrocities.

Does this narrative survive on circumstance alone, that of normal people in extraordinary circumstances? Where had I heard that before? Wasn't that the definition of magic realism? Would this story have vanished without a trace in a world without writing? It has no hook, no obvious moral, no three part structure, plot arc or resolution. It is a story which thrives only as a written one.

But when it is read, the reader's mirror neurones react like never before, the brain is flooded with empathy hormones, the story causes neural connections to be created in places that most other texts don't reach. Harold Rosen argues that: 'Inside every narrative there stalks the ghosts of non-narrative discourse,' but also that: 'inside every non-narrative kind of discourse there stalks the ghost of narrative.'[71]

[71] Harold Rosen, *Stories and their meanings*.

Section Three: The Technical.

'The King died and then the Queen died is a story. The King died and then the queen died of grief is a plot.'[72]

The foundations of my novel had been laid; the chronological beginning lay at the end, with a few hundred years separating it from the opening of the novel set in 1995. I remained undecided on whether this worked or not. On one hand it created difficulties. Working out what the characters would know of the past which the reader hadn't learned yet and how this was conveyed. For the beginning of the novel it presented a problem of concealing the age of the narrator. He would simply have to reminisce and be vague about the period he was reminiscing about. When referring to his childhood, I omit any mention of a hospital, then refer to the journey to England as a long and uncomfortable coach journey, hoping that the reader will imagine a diesel bus and then when they learn he was alive in the 1730's, change this image to horse drawn coach.

I considered this no different from meeting someone for the first time and slowly, over days or weeks, discovering more and more about them. You wouldn't necessarily tell a new work colleague how old you are, where you grew up and how many children you had upon first meeting them.

This led me to wonder again about the very nature of how we think of stories. Wasn't everything in life learned after the fact? 'Life can only be understood backwards; but must be lived forwards.'[73] We always discover everything from the present moment and then delve back into the past to find out more. All 'first' things, whether they are novels, films or a genre of music we have never heard before exist in their 'new to us,' present state and we then investigate who inspired this writer, who this film director was referencing or emulating, which genre this type of music evolved from. We always look backwards to the eras which spawned these things in the hope of discovering similar things.

[72] E.M Forster, *Aspects of the Novel.*
[73] Soren Kierkgaard *Journals.*

Yet the novels and stories I found which attempted to move backwards in time (*The Long View* excluded) seemed to use this technique like a gimmick or a novelty device, rather than a straightforward fact of the story.

In the science fiction *Red Dwarf* Novel *Backwards* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow,* things literally moved backwards; meals begin with clean plates, which are washed with soapy water and then mashed up debris is constructed inside the characters mouths to make food and placed back on the plate. In the *Red Dwarf* novel this is comedy; pulling a pickaxe out of someone to save them means you have murdered them (but it's also OK because as soon as it's happened, it hasn't), in the Amis novel, it's a way of warning the reader that viewed in reverse, the Nazi doctors are responsible for creating life and healing the sick. *Slaughter House Five* touches on similar themes when it describes war backwards. Bombs somehow contain the fire of the burning cities before they are sucked up into aeroplanes, which fly to factories where women dismantle the dangerous contents and then men hide the minerals underground.

Mirror Story by Ilse Aichinger is told in second person and describes life 'commencing' from death backwards, rain falls back up towards the sky and the character grows younger, forgets how to walk or speak and dies at the point of birth. Again, it's interesting for a short story but sustained over a whole novel seems to me like a cheap trick. I've heard it a few times in stand-up comedy routines; *Hey, imagine if life happened backwards; you start work with a retirement party, get younger and healthier, the bank gives you your mortgage back, you get nursed and fed and then end with an orgasm.*

Although I stuck to this format, the research had me continually questioning why it *shouldn't* work and why we had such rigid ideas about the format of stories:

'A story has no beginning or end; arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.'[74]

[74] Graham Greene, *The End of The Affair.*

I looked at my novel, which starts with the chronological ending and works towards the trivial events which began the chain and wondered if the average reader would automatically be expecting a big revelation when they reached the end. I looked at my chronological layout of the events and considered it all, like *Pulp Fiction* with the scenes in the correct order, as an even more pointless story. Terry Eagleton makes a point when he says that: 'Storytelling is an absurd enterprise. It is an attempt to put in sequential form, a reality which is not sequential at all.'[75]

I continued to rewrite the tense in chapters, moving things from third person into first and vice versa. It wasn't just the order of the events which troubled me; it was how to unfurl them via the third person omnipresent narrator and the old man. I didn't seem to be the first author to run into issues like this, I found a similar problem occurred in Dickens' *Old Curiosity Shop*, which was written as it was being serialized. As the chapters progress, Dickens clearly realises that the narrator cannot be present in all the scenes he intends to write, so slowly withdraws the character, presumably hoping that his readers wouldn't notice, until the character narrator's voice is completely absent and all that remains is an omnipresent narrator. This would be something Dickens could have fixed when the novel was eventually published as a complete narrative but it seems he chose not to or didn't envisage his work being scrutinized to such level a hundred and fifty years later.

An unresolved problem lurks within the pages of *Mary Barton* too. At the beginning of the novel, the text hints it will revolve around John Barton (also the original title of the novel), but as the chapters progress, his presence seems to slowly fade away until Mary is the central character. *Mary Barton* also suffers from the haziness narrator problem, which may or may not be Gaskell, and for the majority of the novel is not addressing the reader, although when she does break this fourth wall, it seems glaringly out of place. At one point, a character sings a song called *The Oldham Weaver* and the narrator suddenly asks the reader:

[75] Terry Eagleton, *How to Read Literature.*

'Do you know *The Oldham Weaver*? Not unless you are Lancashire born and bred, for it is a complete Lancashire ditty. I will copy it for you.'[76] Whereupon she proceeds to list the lyrics.

The kind of problem I was worried about was of the reader losing interest or being distracted from the story because they were too aware of the narrator or no longer believe their words. I'd experienced this when reading the Murakami novel *Sputnik Sweetheart*. In the novel, the narrator begins by detailing his encounters and conversations with a girl called Sumire. He occasionally mentions occasions which he was absent from, by way of relaying what Sumire has told him. However, as the novel progresses the narrator, begins to describe, in great detail, more and more conversations and thoughts which he has not witnessed or been told about. For me, the illusion of this novel was over. It would be like a magician asking their audience to look away while they place a rabbit in a hat and then expecting the crowd to be amazed when the animal is magically produced. My concerns were of fictional believability; worrying if someone would believe a story which they knew wasn't true. It's quite ridiculous but is exactly what we want from a story, when writing it or listening to it.

'Adult make believe can endure for millennia because at its best it is created at the resistance even of its creator, who rigorously tests the coherence of her fantasy against the reality of verifiable facts and the demands of systematic logic.'[77]

Before other readers had a chance to pick at the faults, the text underwent my own scrutiny.

We discussed these topics during workshops and they held different amounts of importance to different readers. One person told me they wouldn't distrust the narrator even if they described a scene they could not have themselves witnessed, as long as it was linked to the story. Regarding the possible absence of plot, another person told me they didn't care if the plot never progressed as long as there was something interesting being relayed in each chapter. Some comments praised the scraps of historical information and added that they felt they were learning things without seeming like they were.

[76] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton*.
[77] Karl Kroeber, *Make Believe in Film and Fiction*: Visual vs. Verbal Storytelling

Around ten chapters were read in the workshops. Some of the group found the time shifts unsettling but engaging; others were forever trying to piece together clues which weren't there. Someone noticed that I mentioned the river a lot, therefore thought it had to play a major part in the plot or characters destinies. It didn't, it just ran through the novel like it ran through the city.

During the workshops, it was mentioned that although the novel didn't appear experimental, on closer examination it was. We were back to genre again. Some people read the chapters as magic realism and others as if it were historical fiction. But I wasn't writing it as either genre, so of course it was going to break the boundaries of these genres sooner or later.

The more I wrote, the more I steered away from falling into a clear genre. What some people saw as genre, others saw as a marketing category. But why couldn't something just be as it was, loose and meandering like the earliest novels were? Before genres pigeonholing novels existed and when *Gulliver's Travels, Robinson Crusoe, Don Quixote, The Unfortunate Traveller* and *The Tale of a Tub* all jostled around in spaces of their own creation without anyone worrying about form, length, plot progress or genre.

Slipstream fiction was mentioned, a style of writing which was a little unsettling or strange. Again I didn't identify with it and think my reluctance to latch onto an existing genre was because I hadn't set out to write within one. Slipstream was not a movement or recognizable genre any more than magic realism was. In fact, when I reviewed the list of the top fifty slipstream novels, it seemed to me that it was just another way of describing a writer who has a recognizable style or literary voice.

The novel's style mimicked the city of Manchester, in that it was hard to pin down and full of contradictions; a proud labour movement in the birth place of modern capitalism, a slick, shiny city or a rundown mess. It seems to have been this way throughout history. The richest people living a mile away from the poorest people, a University next to streets of illiterate workers, racism and violence amongst a population made almost entirety of immigrants. If the city was hard to pin down, then so was the novel.

The Lizzie chapter was workshopped as soon as I'd written it. I felt that it was the weakest chapter I'd written so far, possibly due to the fact I'd momentarily fallen into a quasi-Gaskell style. To me it felt flat and least Irving-like of all the chapters I'd written. Despite my reservations, all the comments were very positive. Everyone praised the crisp feeling of reality and the heart breaking bleakness of the chapter. The bleakness of the chapter bothered me too. I kept thinking that it was sad but that I could change it, as if the character was a real person. It was primal empathy in action. I'd experienced it reading fiction before but it was strange to feel it as a writer who had caused the character to suffer.

Several people asked whether it was a short story and didn't realize it was a chapter, a prelude to the next section of the novel. This was quite satisfying as I wrote it with the intention of distracting the reader from the chapters which precede it in order to re-introduce the narrator and Seller again to show they were just part of a world which was moving along with or without them.

The comments were extremely useful as they concerned how the individual readers interpreted the chapters, which were sometimes nothing like I intended when writing them. There is one small section where, for several pages, none of the main characters are featured, which begins:

'The pigeon sees the old man approach and launches itself off the beehive into the air. It flaps frantically and rises over the chimney smoke, the roof tops, the people and train carriages, high above the factory and mills. It glides over the dye works, the bleach works, the tanneries and is now well beyond the local area it is familiar with.'[78]

The chapter was intended to be a breathing space from the story, one in which I could describe a bird's eye view (literally) of Manchester and highlight the fact that a few miles away from the grimness of Manchester, there was countryside, without directly stating this. I wanted to avoid having to make a character view the scene from a high building or imagine what the place would look

[78] Adam Irving. *A River.*

like from above, both in my opinion clumsy solutions to the perspective problem If *River* had been a film, this was the slow zoom out shot.

I thought that when showing the chapter to a group of fiction writers, someone would probably spot what I was doing in this section. Instead, completely unexpectedly, the group interpreted the pigeon as Lizzie's soul, rising above her body and the place she lived. I explained that neither myself as a writer, nor the old man narrator was in any way religious and I'd never even considered it as a spiritual rising, but it seemed the readers interpreted this as what I *really* meant.

Up to this point I'd thought about *ToM* in relation to the characters; how the old man draws his victims in by exploiting their weaknesses to lure them to a theatre, rooftop, his house etc. I'd also thought about *ToM* of the reader in order to plan sequences which connect; the chapter before Lizzie ends abruptly when the old man bumps into a nameless 'her.' I hoped that twenty pages of Lizzie's story would distract the reader from thinking about the previous chapters so they should be pleasantly surprised when Lizzie meets the old man and the chapters catch up with each other and meet. What I hadn't considered was readers pulling totally unrelated strands into the story in order to make sense of it.

Around this time I was diagnosed with cancer and started chemotherapy. I didn't tell anyone in the workshop group about this, I told only a handful of people. Amazingly, my reasons for secrecy were narrative related. Isn't everything? My reasoning was that I wasn't going to *become* the story. I was going to *own* the story. Just because I had cancer didn't mean my life suddenly had to be transformed into a real life stream of updates, which those around me would construct their own versions of the story from. But this is a whole different story which I'll save for another time. The chemo made me feel like crap, I attended the workshops but was in no mood for preparing a new chapter for the group to read, so submitted a piece which was written the previous year. The chapter was the arsenic section, which described the stages of arsenic poisoning and its effect on the human body, which I can now confirm is pretty similar to the effects of chemotherapy. The chapter also describes Dr. Hunt discussing the fact he may be dying and his anger at this knowledge.

If I'd told my workshop group about my diagnosis, there was *absolutely* no way they would ever believe that this chapter wasn't directly linked to my current circumstances. It would be impossible not to jump to this conclusion; even if I had specifically told them it had been written before I'd become sick they would still disregard the statement, in the same way we would find it impossible to read a novel written by David Cameron which revolved around a fictional smarmy prime minster without making comparisons to Cameron's real life.

The historical settings were at the forefront of my mind when writing the novel chapters but I didn't want to shoehorn time references in or prefix each chapter with the year it took place. I looked at published diaries from the last two hundred years and noticed how, if you didn't know which century or decade they were written, there were few clues or references to indicate it. Most of the time, history happens without anyone seeing the relevance or impact it will have on future generations. You aren't always conscious that your present is someone else's past.

I found examples of fictional time and location setting which I used as examples to avoid, such as two from the opening pages of Deborah Moggach's *Tulip Fever*: 'he is thirty six, the same age as our brave new century,'[79] and: 'he reclaimed me, as we reclaimed our country from the seas.'[80] Both no doubt intended to subtly inform the reader the novel is set in Amsterdam in 1735. Bearing in mind the reader will have probably first seen the cover showing a seventeenth century painting and no doubt also read the blurb on the back stating the story to be set in seventeenth century Amsterdam, the sentences do seem a little clumsy.

I chose to avoid mentioning the year unless it was relevant to the story, so it is only referenced when mentioning a character's death or birth. When it came to chapters titles, I didn't want to reveal the years of the sections, I wanted the reader to work it out for themselves. The backwards movement somehow hinted that numbering them, in either direction, may also look out of place so I settled for images.

[79] Deborah Moggach. *Tulip Fever*
[80] Ibid.

The chapter images I used are all composite images of imaginary Manchester panoramas. In fitting with the rest of the novel, they are fictitious skylines composed black and white images of real buildings specific to the period of the section they precede. Most are photographs but line drawings have also been processed to look like photographs.

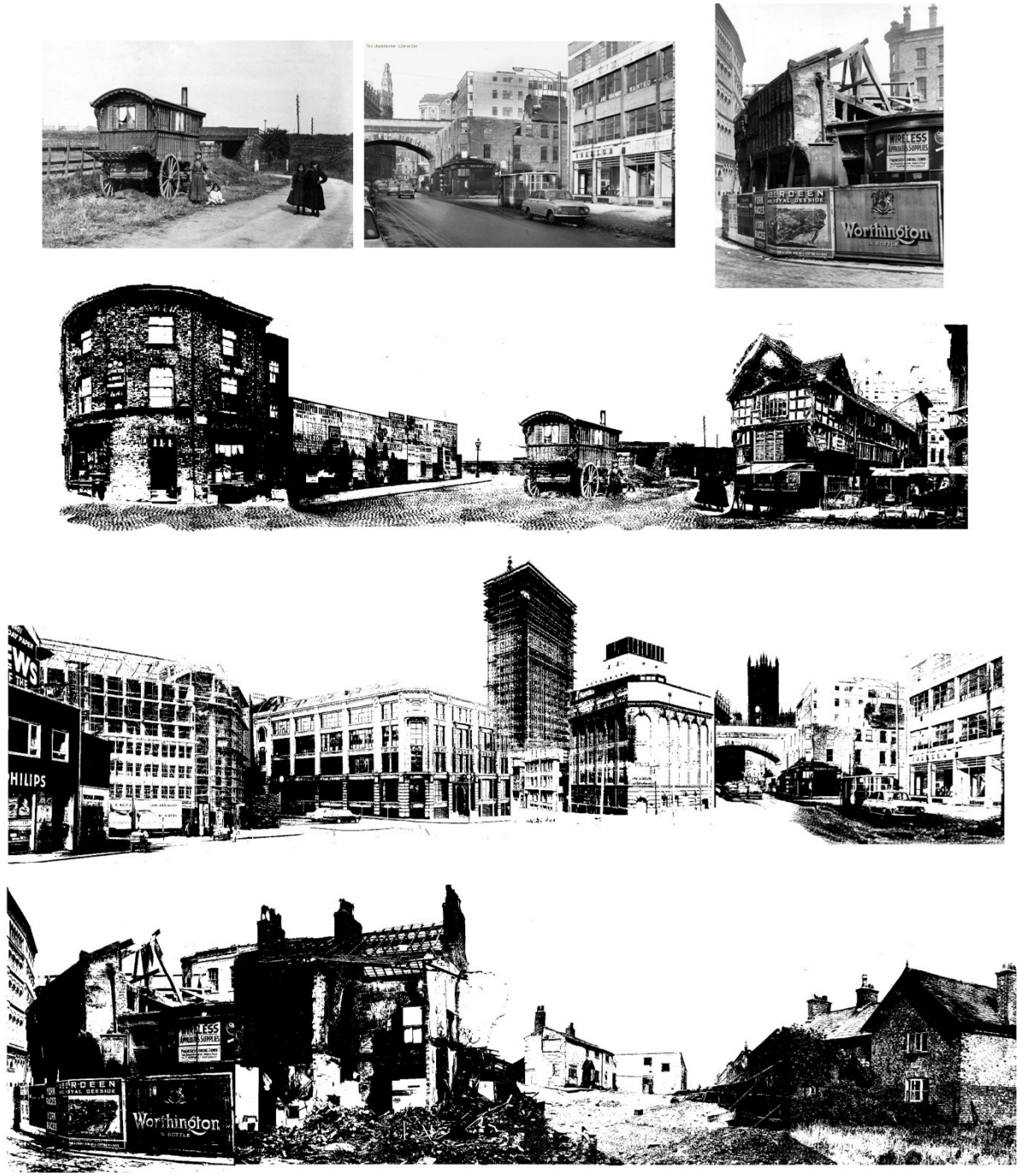

Figure 4 Three source images placed within the chapter images.

I did a quick test on a dozen people (none of them historians) to see if the average person's architectural knowledge was as I hoped, showing them the pictures and asking them to put them in

chronological order. Their reaction was instinctive, fast and more importantly, correct. The pictures were laid on in order; 1990's, 1830's, 1700's. I concluded that if the average reader can interpret and conclude the period from a small grainy black and white skyline, in theory they should be able to do the same for any section of the novel.

Detail and accuracy run through the novel. I am an admirer of Herge's Tintin books. Despite the fact that they were written for children and many of them were serialized, eight frames at a time, over many years in newspapers, Herge carried out a phenomenal amount of research to ensure the details were correct. The vast majority of the buildings and objects in the books are real things; from cigarettes, guns, cars, phones, trousers, cupboards, shoes or dog collars, they are always true to the country the tale takes place in.

Figure 5 Two examples of Herge's depictions of real buildings.

I find this dedication to detail admirable at the same time as being slightly obsessive. Herge would often update previous versions of the same book to keep them modern. For example, the actual story of the *The Black Island* remains identical in the 1930 (black and white) and 1943 (colour) versions, but when it was to be reprinted in 1966, Herge sent one of his staff to Scotland to gather

sketches and photographs to update the book. When the 1966 version appeared, the book included hundreds of changes which had been made to the depictions of kilts, firemen and police uniforms, guns, cars, trains, whiskey bottles and buildings.

Figure 6 Two frames of the 1943 version of *The Black Island* followed by the same two frames of the 1966 version.

This was the kind of unnecessary detail I wished to include in the novel. I wanted the chapters to take place on real streets and to instil a real world feeling. I tried to make the games, boxing, markets and violin details as accurate as possible.

It's worth asking why I felt I needed to maintain this level of historical accuracy. This was a novel after all; it didn't really matter if I made up a building or invented a street did it? Did this seemingly unnecessary detail make a difference? It did to me. If a character needed to light a match, I would find out if matches existed in that particular year, how much they would cost and what people would call them. If my character used a gun, I would investigate what weapons were available in that period, how they were loaded, what they sounded like, what they smelled like.

It also meant I found myself having to rewrite many little details such as references to pockets when I discovered that they didn't exist until the end of the eighteenth century and even then not on the clothes of commoners. Early drafts of the novel had pockets mentioned a number of times and all of them had to be removed. How could a character put their hands in their pockets if they didn't exist, how could an item be 'pocketed' when there was no such thing? I realize that this is an artistic line that the author must draw; some authors would claim that if it's necessary for the plot, then allowances might be made. The majority of people don't know the history of pockets after all.

But if I knew something didn't exist, then it really couldn't be included in my fictional world. If I thought it might not exist, I had to find out.

When researching the location and factual details of the novel, one series of books was a big influence, not because of the information within it, but where the information originated. David Kynaston's *Austerity Britain* books focus on a fascinating viewpoint from which to research history. That is, reading about key events as told by people experiencing them at the time. The books are written using diaries, letters and reports from the Mass observation Archive which recorded everyday life in Britain from 1937-1980. Unlike a historian, researching specific areas from records and arriving at conclusions or novelist, depicting facts held together with fiction, the reports are refreshing and revealing, in that they are written from the eye of the hurricane by people who are unaware that this particular event will be seen as important by future generations. The descriptions are unaffected by the future decades of condensing or rewriting the moment in reflection of what has since been discovered. I wanted to capture this kind of mood in the novel chapters.

I also looked to both fact and fiction depicting Manchester in the period I was writing about. In her autobiography, Doris Lessing says: 'there is no doubt that fiction makes a better job of the truth.'[81] Elizabeth Gaskell, commenting on her novel Mary Barton said: 'I believe I wrote the truth,'[82] but she only wrote one aspect of the truth which enabled her point to be made and as Sartre said: 'in a novel it's necessary to lie in order to be true.'[83] Despite this:

'it is possible to maintain that the best historians of England in the 1840's were the novelists, as long as the claim is settled by historical and not aesthetic criteria.'[84]

I found myself again looking at creative nonfiction and how it stood amidst works of fiction. I leaned more towards the E.L. Doctorow statement that there is: 'no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there's only narrative.'[85]

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[81] Doris Lessing, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949.*
[82] Chappele & Pollard, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell.*
[83] Jean Paul Sartre, *War Journals.*
[84] Laurence Lerner, *History & Fiction.*
[85] E.L.Doctorow, The New York Times Book Review.

I went back to Anne Frank's diary and the three books by Patrick Leigh Fermor[86] which chronicled his walk through Europe in the 1930's. Each told factual and almost directionless tales, which were historically interesting because time had moved on and the vivid present of the tales was now a mysterious past. My intention with *River* was to create a fictional set of events but set them in a real place, on real streets, in real buildings, to feature real detail in a historical setting, without relying on the work being historical fiction.

I approached this period research in the same way I would prior to visiting a European city. Throughout the years I am conscious that I have a general idea of the size and shape of a place. I can identify the age of buildings by their appearance and locate the centre by the shape and plan of the roads. This is something we all do, when lost; we all use these clues to navigate back to the known. Likewise, I wanted to write as I would explore a place, avoiding the tourist traps (i.e. having my character meet important historical figures) and heading straight for the interesting side alleys and dead ends (illegal basement boxing matches and isolated rooftops).

I had a list of books which I was aware covered similar territory, some of which I liked, but had no intention of emulating such as Will Eisner's graphic novels[87] all set in the same street or building in New York over several decades, which showed expensive Victorian apartments of the Bronx become slums and eventually demolished. I also admired Chester Himes' Harlem novels[88] for their depiction of the intricate detail of an everyday American life which is now long gone. Other books seemed to tackle similar ideas as mine such as Rosina Lippi's *Homestead*, which is based in a small Alpine village over several generations and can be read as individual short stories. As I have already mentioned, these served more as ways I didn't want my novel to travel towards, but showed different ways of tackling similar themes.

I found that although there was an abundance of history books about Manchester they were lacking in the kind of detail I was craving, that of the normal everyday things. The history books,

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[86] Patrick Leigh Fermor, *Between the Woods and the Water, A Time of Gifts, The Broken Road.*
[87] Will Eisner, *Dropsie Avenue, The Building, A Life Force.A Contract With God.*
[88] Chester Himes, *A Rage in Harlem, Real Cool Killers, Crazy Kill, The Big Gold Dream, All Shot Up, The Heat's On, Cotton Comes to Harlem, Blind Man with a Pistol, Plan B,*

rightly so, only detailed the important events or important people and when they did brush upon everyday life, as in archaeological survey, it was all guess work.

Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction was particularly interesting because several of her novels and short stories centred on issues most of her contemporaries avoided; poverty, inequality and hardship. Although these do serve as excellent documents of the time, they are marred a little for me by the moral messages attached to each one; that is, of being a god-fearing person above all. Similar depictions of Manchester can be seen in some novels by Walter Greenwood and Howard Spring, who again, wrote about a specific class of Manchester society and with their own political, social or religious agendas to push.

Frederick Engels' *The Condition of the Working-Class in England* contains some highly absorbing depictions of Manchester slum life in 1844, describing the same area and period as Gaskell's *Mary Barton* does and detailing, with stomach churning clarity, the exact network of streets in which I had set my novel. Again, I was aware that Engels had a clear agenda in highlighting the things he focuses upon. Along with wondering what embellishment parts may have had, I found some of his other views slightly hard to digest. In his preamble on Manchester origins, in which his stance, that the capitalist industrial society is abhorrent is blatantly clear, Engels states that before the *Industrial Revolution*: 'Wife and daughter spun the yarn that the father wove or that they sold,'[89] he mentions the: 'impossibility of vigorous competition of the workers among themselves,'[90] and goes on to say a worker grew food: 'in his leisure hours, of which he had as many as he chose to take, since he could weave whenever and as long as he pleased,'[91] and adds that the workers: 'did not need to overwork; they did no more than they chose to do, and yet earned what they needed. They had leisure for healthful work in garden or field, work which, in itself, was recreation for them.'[92]

[89] Frederick Engels, *Conditions of the Working Class in England.*
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

So far, to me, what he is describing sounds representative of a fine community. He goes further and states: 'they were, for the most part, strong, well-built people,' that: 'their children grew up in the fresh country air, and, if they could help their parents at work, it was only occasionally.'[93]

As the paragraphs surge ahead, Engels says that: 'the young people grew up in idyllic simplicity and intimacy with their playmates until they married,'[94] they: 'never talked politics, never conspired, never thought, intellectually, they were dead.'[95]

I pondered his stance. The time he was describing had no inkling of the world changing events of *the Industrial Revolution*. They had no need for politics or intellectual thought. He concludes that: 'they were comfortable in their silent vegetation, and but for the Industrial Revolution they would never have emerged from this existence, which, cosily romantic as it was, was nevertheless not worthy of human beings,'[96] 'the Industrial Revolution has simply carried this out to its logical end by making the workers machines pure and simple.'[97] It seemed Engels own ideal didn't exist in his own time or the time that preceded it.

Engels' vision of perfect life is itself a fantasy creation, which he never clearly spells out. What I was looking for was a source that fell in-between the historical facts and figures and the political or religious agendas. I read several articles, stories and poems by Edwin Waugh, which were a treasure trove of unnecessary details. Waugh was a Lancashire Victorian writer whose writings I suspect, may have been seen as very dull in their day, record his thoughts, walks and such moments as sitting in a pub eating a meal. They are priceless for their recording of local dialect, mannerisms and description. There were still gaps missing which I wished to fill. I went to see an art exhibition in Birmingham, entitled *A River Runs Through It* to see the galleries spin on the relevance of waterways and towns and also made use of Manchester library's early photo archive searching for period sources of information. The collection is primarily an archive of council photos of buildings or streets which were

[93] Frederick Engels, *Conditions of the Working Class in England.*
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.

being considered for renovation or to be demolished entirely. It was useful for seeing the fascinating images of forgotten buildings from multiple angles, view their decline through the decades and recreate a mental map of the long-gone streets.

Figure 7 The Vintner's Arms (clockwise) in 1876, 1900 and 1865.

This was still only a fragment of eras I was trying to depict. I found texts like Gaulter's *Origin and Progress of the Malignant Cholera in Manchester*, describing the same streets and period that Engels and Gaskell had, from a purely medical viewpoint, a good source of information. The combination of Waugh, Engels, Gaskell, Gaulter and images however was my intended destination; fact, story and an ample amount of unnecessary detail.

I wondered if this was a wise way of writing for a while. I then came across two quotes:

'I think there are two types of writers, the architects and the gardeners. The architects plan everything ahead of time, like an architect building a house. They know how many rooms are going to be in the house […] have the whole thing designed and blueprinted out before they even nail the first board up. The gardeners dig a hole, drop in a seed and water it. They kind of know what seed it is, they know if planted a fantasy seed or mystery seed or whatever. But as the plant comes up and they

water it, they don't know how many branches it's going to have, they find out as it grows.'[98] Closely followed by:

'I do not plan my fiction any more than I normally plan woodland walks; I follow the path that seems most promising at any given point, not some itinerary decided before entry.'[99]

So I ploughed on ahead, backwards, with the writing. The more I wrote, the more I looked for comparisons. Not just in the way the story progresses, but in its use of characters. The Seller sons are essentially the same man 'reborn' in a different era. I saw an unlikely comparison with Virginia Woolf's *Orlando,* which is told in a non-conventional way and which features a character who lives over two hundred years.

Other than that, I found myself reminded of the television comedy Blackadder, where each series is set in a different time period and, for three of the four series, the character is effectively the same man in a different century. Also, again I was drawn back to Tintin, a character who, as a child I accepted was a young man in all the books, yet at the same time, I was aware from the clothes, cars and technology, that in some books it was the 1970's yet others, it seemed to be the 1930's or 1950's. To me, there was no element of magic realism in Tintin never growing older, the world around him aged but he remained the same.

I made use of the North West Film Archive, which enabled me to view panoramas and street scenes from Manchester's past. These were useful but still not quite the hands-on detail I craved. For that I looked elsewhere.

Since I was a child, I've been fascinated by abandoned buildings. Perhaps because they were, like the uncovered pit, glimpses into the past. As I wrote *River*, I broke into several buildings as part of the research.[100] I sneaked into the hidden chambers and corridors which are part of the bridges at Victoria Station to observe the progression of the building; the bridges, which now appear to be one

[98] *George R.R. Martin, Geekson.*

[99] *John Fowles. The Tree.*

[100] I'm aware that the recent 'hipster' terminology for this practice is *Urban Exploration* or *Urbex* but I'm loathed to put a pretentious name to what is essentially breaking into buildings. Had I encountered the police at any point, I can't imagine terminology or explanations that it was novel research would have got me very far.

construction, were built decades apart and granite sits flush with brick, which sits next to steel girders. I squeezed out of a tiny window and walked across the river on the steel framework to a viewpoint which had been hidden from the public since the 1830's and found undisturbed herons nests and swans eggs.

I climbed the scaffolding of a building on *Shudehill* and entered from the roof, to explore light shafts and boarded up basements, one of which still bore a faded painting of racing greyhounds from when the building had been an illegal betting shop in the 1930's. The same basement had a dirt and flagstone floor, the internal walls had been removed but the flags showed the signs of routes, worn deep into them over decades, from a time when the space had been an 18th century basement dwelling.

In other buildings, I found tiny trickling waterways in cellars, 19th century wallpaper, disused staircases leading to where adjoining buildings had once been and enormous abandoned safes and gas appliances. This touching and smelling were far more useful than reading about places.

I visited many of the settings for the chapters. One of them, the 1955 chapter that takes place in the Club El Bossa Nova, was once a building that stood opposite Victoria station. It had originally been the Cathedral's Sunday school building, now it appeared to be nothing more than a pile of rubble, low wall and advertising hoarding. On closer examination, underneath the charred wooden frame of the original building, I found a number of basement rooms intact.

Figure 8 Todd Street building in 1965, 1980 and present day.

I also set out with an 1859 copy of *The Manchester Flora* to see if any of the hedgerows and fields detailed in the book, were still there and if they still contained the same plants from a hundred and fifty years ago. The book led me back to the river and the banks the Irk and the Irwell, arguably

the only areas of the city centre which haven't been built on. Amazingly, I found the sorrel, woodruff, ransom, blackberries and many of the flowers, which the book described, still in the same place, a century and a half later. In keeping with the narrator's raw diet, I also made a number of delicious salads from these foraged ingredients.

I used a map cross referencing programme to flick between plans of Manchester from a four hundred year period, which enabled me to see the growth and development of the City as well as seeing layouts of the hundreds of streets which had been demolished to make way for the railway stations, town halls and shopping centres.

We tend to see maps like we see our present; fixed points in time. But really, maps are often out of date before they are even printed and our present is constantly changing. I was drawn to the missing pieces, the streets that disappeared from one map to the next. Drawn to finding out why streets changed their names, why squares appeared or why roads continued to take on the direction of a river which was long gone.

With the first drafts completed, I looked back on the mysterious thing I had created. I know, for a fact for example, that I didn't write the arsenic chapter as a response to having cancer. But why did I write that section? At first glance, the novel was a meandering story of gambling, destiny, age and death. There was the lack of names versus the overload of the Seller family names , which end up with Keith Serrah whose initials, K Serrah are themselves a homophonic pun on the phrase *Que Sera (*or *che sarà sarà*) and in turn 1960's song which continues with the lyrics, 'Whatever will be will be. The future's not up to me.'

Then there were the initial seeds of my childhood memories of the rubbish pit; 'Survivors from another age. The men saw the future when they looked at the land. I saw the past. You, no doubt will see the present. It's strange how three souls think of the same place in three different ways.'[101]

[101] Adam Irving, *A River.*

There were other fragments of my own life in there too. I had never met my father's father but had been told I shared his mannerisms and temperament, which are not those of my father.

The narrator describes the river as 'a place which was not really a place. It came from somewhere and went somewhere else.'[102] But was I applying this same logic to the city too? It was not a character, not the same to all who had lived within it. It was always changing.

So what was going on under the bonnet of my novel? I had written something which didn't snuggly fit into any particular place in the literary canon. I'd written something which was well researched and at times, hopefully made the reader ask questions. I saw repetition, cycles and the flowing of life.

It then occurred to me that I hadn't written this novel as a writer. I've only been writing fiction since around 1998, but I have been writing music since around 1985. I'd written the novel as I would compose a piece of music. I'd bounced riffs and motifs off each other, laid them over a chord sequence and then filled in the gaps with harmonies and backing parts to fill out the sound. I'd written it as a musician.

And with instrumental music, there is no intent and meaning, there is just the sound of rhythms and harmonies, of improvising over a theme, interplaying under and around it, experiencing the shape of the piece. Whereas some of the workshop writers had written novels with clear themes to push, or planned each chapter using the snowflake method to ensure the correct measure of ingredients were present, I had jammed with the components then played around with any wrong notes during overdubbing. I had edited a few bars here and there and then cleaned up the rest in the final mix. I had avoided the chord changes which reminded me of other songs (which explained the haziness of genre) and had avoided easy short cuts like repeating the chorus to kill time or fading the song out at the end.

[102] Ibid.

When I read back the words, I had the same experience as when listening to a piece of my own music. That somehow, it no longer belonged to me, that I had been involved in its creation at the time, but now looked back on it and asked myself, d*id I just write that?*

I hear the scepticism. The words didn't just drop out of thin air; I did play *some* part in their order. But the underlying themes were vague even to me as the author. I asked myself what I had written about.

There was reoccurrence of the same event and its allusion to life; what appeared to be destiny or fate was in fact the result of a gambling debt. To put it another way, life is random, life is a gamble. There was the trickling pattern of similar events running through the years. There was age, permanence, constantly shifting parameters of a place or location and vagueness. The themes of vagueness were as vague as my own definitions of what the novel was about. What was actually present was still a bit of mystery to me. But I liked it that way. I wanted to know why we read stories, but in this instance, didn't particularly want to know how my own magic trick was done or exactly why something worked or didn't work.

When I was a child I remember a music lesson where the teacher played us 'good' and 'bad' intervals and demonstrated how the good ones should sound in compositions. I was immediately interested in why the so-called 'bad' intervals couldn't be used and who and when had decided which ones were which. I had spent years composing and performing music this way and was surprised to learn that this was what I'd been doing in my writing too.

Change in any medium happens gradually, but it only happens because people make small variations to the current norm. Convention and standard ways of doing things are not static, they are constantly changing. As I wrote *River*, I thought more and more about these standard, unwritten rules of chapter length and form. The workshop comments made me ask myself even more questions. Why was it relevant to specify the novels genre? Was it important if the chapters didn't conclude or wrap-up the eras they were set in? What use were the terms *mainstream* and

experimental; if Gertrude Stein suddenly sold three million copies would that make her less experimental and more mainstream?

When I was a child I'd purposely written pieces of music that included the 'bad' intervals, as an adult I'd done a similar thing by trying to tell the story (whatever that was) in reverse, by removing the narrators name and by insisting all the places and things in the novel be factually accurate. I had created a subtle parallel in the Seller family men, who are all essentially the same person, by having them echo the character of the city, which is too, perpetually changing in all but name, while simultaneously remaining the same place.

It was still difficult to identify what I had done when writing *River*, because the things which made it different were all things I *hadn't* done. I was conscious not to write a mainstream novel. It cropped up in every single one of the workshops. The group of writers read the chapters as writers. They saw the first chapter as a base for all relevant character and story setting devices. They saw the Seller character and wanted him to be involved in an increasing number of incidents as the story went on, they saw the old narrator and imaged an underground network of other very old people who he might interact with, they saw a historical setting and imagined a standard historical novel involving lots of references to key moments in Manchester's history. The readers expected the story to go in a certain direction based upon familiar themes, topics and settings.

Every time these topics cropped up, I felt I was on the right path in avoiding them and heading in the opposite direction, not considering who my readers were or how the novel could be marketed or categorised. I wanted to create a readable and accessible experimental novel, if such a thing existed, one that was a highly personal and made of a unique collection of interlocking parts. In short, I was writing not as a writer, but as an investigative artist creating a novel which merged history and story. If I have to nail a label to it, I believe *River* to be an experimental piece of historiographic metafiction, which is open to interpretation and can be read in a number of different ways.

My unconventional writing process had led me to all available sources of inspiration; newspapers, books, websites, recipes, photographs, films and buildings. Likewise, my writing was feeding off the fiction I was reading at the time; Proust, Gaskell, Himes, Woolf, Winterson and a dozen other authors. It was as difficult to pinpoint which parts of which books had seeped into my writing as it was to state categorically what I was writing about. I asked a friend, another writer, to read the novel and tell me what he thought it was about.

"It's obvious," he said, "the old man is the past and the city is change. It's about the conflict of the past and the present. Simplicity and progress."

"When you are in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard are powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or someone else."[103]

I like to think that I somehow wrote the story in the way which Margaret Atwood describes; from within it, and looked back after it had all happened to see exactly what the story was.

[103] Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace.*

Section Four: The End?

'People bleed stories, but academics gather narratives.'[104]

It is now clear that we speak and listen in story. We absorb narrative regardless of culture. Adolf Bastian called it *Elementargedanken* and said that: 'we are products of physiological mechanisms characteristic of the human species.'[105] Namely, we all think the same way. It happens automatically, in the same way we blink or laugh.

As a child, these stories are private and churned out as play on a daily basis and for our own amusement. As we become adults, the stories simply change to be public stories; tales we want to believe or, if involved in creating them, we want others to believe. We never stop consuming stories and structure our memories of the past based upon them.

Even within stories we seek them out and respond to them. In *One Hundred Years Of Solitude,* which is itself a flurry of smaller tales, the town people are introduced to cinema for the first time and after watching several films, realize that the actors who have 'died' in the previous films are alive again in the next. They wreck the cinema, which the mayor calls *a machine of illusion*, that:

'did not merit the emotional outbursts of the audience. They already had too many troubles of their own to weep over the misfortunes of imaginary beings.'[106] Although a fictional scenario, it is at odds with Daniel Pennac's claim that: 'one of the crucial functions of storytelling is to offer respite from human struggle.'[107]

Gottschall's stance is that while story may educate and entertain us, it does not mean it has a biological purpose: 'It is nothing like the opposable thumb – a structure which helped

[104] Unni Wikan, *With Life in One's Lap: The Story of an Eye/I.*
[105] Adolf Bastian. *The Foundations of Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Germany*.
[106] Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years Of Solitude*.
[107] Daniel Pennac, The Rights of the Reader

our ancestors to survive and reproduce.'[108] It is human quirk, a trait we have somehow acquired. In her book *Why We Read Fiction,* Lisa Zunshine believes the reason may just be because it tickles or exercises our *ToM*. It's not a very thrilling conclusion, but then again her book is not a story.

To summarise, the various theories seem to fall broadly into the following four categories;

- **Social cohesion**; shared stories are shared histories. They help communities, families and groups of people bond by having a shared sense of themselves. They reinforce cooperation between these communities.
- **Avoidance of danger**; Being able to construct fictitious scenarios in imaginary worlds, stories serve as a: 'low cost source of information and vicarious experience,'[109]
- **Status or sexual selection**; Knowledge as power. The ability to manipulate people by understanding what they know.
- **Cognitive play**; stories keep our minds active when there is no need to avoid danger or attract a partner. This would also include education.

All of these theories bring up a far more complex question; that of evolution, which in itself warrants a whole library of books. For something to have evolved, what criteria are we judging this evolution and has this evolution reached an end? If so, what is the state we are judging things by? Not a second goes by without someone somewhere meeting his or her death by accident caused by their failing to predict danger, so should we view the danger avoidance theory as a failure? An estimated 3% of the world suffer from autism and Asperger's, resulting in severe imaginative impairment of narrative, empathy and *ToM*.

[108] Jonathan Gottschall, The Storytelling Animal.
[109] Jonathan Gottschall, The Storytelling Animal.

Should we dismiss both the danger avoidance *and* the Social Cohesion theory because of this? Throughout history there have been more than enough examples of unimaginative violence overcoming knowledge and resulting in domination. Does this mean the status and sexual selection should be dismissed also? If evolutionary theories were correct, shouldn't there be a war free culture somewhere, built upon generations of storytellers, overflowing with empathy and prizing story above all else?

Story seems inseparable from the human race: 'but how could you live and have no story to tell?'[110]

It is what we crave:

'second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives, from the small accounts of our day's events to the vast incommunicable constructs of psychopaths.'[111]

Gertrude Stein's last words were, "What is the answer?" When she received no reply, she said, "In that case, what is the question?" I never thought there would be an occasion that these words would be used to conclude anything other than Stein's life, but they seem quite relevant now. The answer to why stories exist may be right there in the question: 'The brain is not designed for story; there are glitches in its design that make it vulnerable to story.'[112] Humans have evolved over millennia asking 'why?' and it would seem stories are a similar trait, one which has enabled mankind to think differently, to explore, create and destroy their surroundings in ever more ingenious ways. We want to know what happens next in a soap opera, novel or film. We are interested in gossip and news and we often find

[110] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *White Nights and Other Stories.*
[111] Price, Reynolds, *A Palpable God.*

[112] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal.*

ourselves daydreaming. Cosmides and Tooby liken the human mind to a Swiss army knife, capable of finding suitable solutions for different problems. I like to think of it this way too, with the additional observation; on my own Swiss army knife there are two tools which are supposed to be for sewing and getting items out of horses hooves respectively. I have used these tools many times but never for sewing or removing objects from hooves. The plot of a soap opera may be interpreted by viewers in several different ways and in turn, is being watched for different reasons. Our mind may have these tools at its disposal but it doesn't mean we use them in the same way we did five thousand years ago: 'Writing was invented a mere 5200 years ago, but we have been speaking and presumably mythmaking for 100,000 years or more.'[113] In evolutionary terms, as a species, we have not even warmed up developing and tweaking this area of our minds.

The fact remains that we cannot help asking 'why?' It is the reason that my workshop were compelled to know the name of a fictional character narrating the exploits of other fictional characters in my novel even though it was immaterial. It is also the same reason that led me to wonder if I could write the whole novel without naming him and in turn resolve the problems caused by not being able to refer to him as 'the old man' when I reached the later chapters in which he was young.

It is proven that stories help children develop through play and that they assist in the mastering of important social skills. It is also true that stories are useful tools in the field of medicine, in recreation, in learning and in understanding. But ultimately, we do it naturally. We constantly want answers and seldom admit that sometimes there are no answers. None of the theories put forward are applicable all the time. There is no single explanation. It is the thirst for knowing that drives us on and at the same time the thing we crave:

[113] Elizabeth & Paul Barber, *When They Severed the Earth From the Sky: How the Human Mind Shapes Myth.*

‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.[114]

Joseph Conrad’s words, when refereeing fictional endings, can just as well be applied to nonfiction when he says that they: ‘satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn with a longing greater than the longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth.’[115]

In short, when asking why we have such an appetite for stories, the answer may very well be the seemingly unimaginative, ‘we just do,’ but because we are an uber-inquisitive tale spinning species, who demand answers, I admit this is not a particularly satisfactory conclusion, but this is not a novel.

‘The answer is never the answer. What's really interesting is the mystery. If you seek the mystery instead of the answer, you'll always be seeking. I've never seen anybody really find the answer, but they think they have. So they stop thinking… The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.’[116]

Storytelling does play a large part in our early development, but it if were that simple why do we not just abandon it in adulthood? Like another unanswered question, why do we yawn?, theories abound and we have to accept that sometimes the answer to the question may just be very dull, an echo of a trait which helped us evolve but is now no longer used for what it once was. Storytelling could be to our minds what the appendix is to our body.

[114] Albert Einstein *Mein Weltbild*.
[115] Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters, Henry James. An Appreciation.*

[116] Ken Kesey *The Paris Review*.

Section Five: Answers.

To be ourselves we must have ourselves – possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories. We must "recollect" ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self"

Oliver Sacks[117]

Time goes by and the dust settles. At some point, the years of novel 'writing' suddenly became 'written' and the novel is in a presentable draft. Before I began, I read on a writing blog that a writer never really knows what their novel is about until it is complete. Only, when they look back on it, peer into the workings, do they see the hidden seams running through the story, but even this can change with time. As the years go by and the past becomes part of a larger past, I may find myself reconsidering what I thought my intentions were and view the work in a different light. In the future I may reflect on the time and events which have passed and see new messages in the writing. Again, I think of the pit of uncovered rubbish I mentioned at the beginning. Back then, I saw something I thought was interesting, a fleeting glimpse of the past, while everyone else assumed it was just a hole in the ground or a place to build a semi-detached house. For me, it was because a hole is, by definition, an empty space, a void which is supposed to contain nothing that I felt the need to have a closer look and investigate.

What I set out to write, may not necessarily be what I ended up writing, and whether I think I know, or don't know what I intended to write, the words have been released and readers can interpret the work, the words, the themes, the hidden or not so hidden

[117] Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat.*

messages and suggestions in whichever way they choose. The reader has lots of things to choose. They choose to read the work in the first instance. They choose to continue reading it once they have started. They choose to let the writer guide them somewhere. I hope that a reader will be able to detect and appreciate the choices I have made as a writer and how or why my novel has been shaped the way it is.

I set out to write a readable experimental novel. That is, a creative work of fiction, not confined to a genre, set in a city I know well, whose subject would explore time, identity and change and remind the reader that familiar places are in a constant of flux. I wanted the resulting novel to be an enjoyable, yet challenging read. I wanted the reader to question their idea of a story, not to expect or rely on standard textbook plots or characters. I invited the reader to trace the events but also to let their mind drift a little. I hoped they would stop looking for clues which would lead from A to B and invited them to become distracted and think about themselves, their surroundings and time. I wanted elements of the novel to enter the hazy maze-like part of the reader's mind where one thought leads to another and before long you have forgotten how you arrived at the present thought.

Sometimes I read novels or see films which aren't necessarily enjoyable and that I wouldn't recommend to other people or revisit, but months or even years later, I find myself thinking about. Lukas Moodysson's *Container* is one such film. It's shot in black and white, none of the characters speak, there is no plot and the only constant factor to cling onto is a girl's voice whispering stream of consciousness without a pause. It's hard work to watch something with nothing familiar to grasp, and when I saw it at the cinema, the members of the audience who didn't walk out after ten minutes were in a state of shock by the time the credits rolled. In fact, the cinema staff brought plastic cups of water round for those who had endured the full relentless seventy two minutes and who remained seated when the lights

came on. Moodysson aimed for a completely uncharted location in his viewer's minds and succeeded in getting there. I left the cinema thinking of a hundred things at once and none of them were experimental Swedish Cinema. I thought of linear and non-linear storytelling, repetition, American silent movies, musical soundtracks, repetition, I thought of the neural pathways of my mind, how a few years before, I'd seen Moodysson's previous 'family friendly' film without subtitles in Swedish, which I don't speak a word of, but now remembered that film as being in English. I thought of how funny it was that the audience were in a state of shock because they had been deprived of a story and generally wallowed in the feeling of being reenergised by something new and wanted to get on with the three of four projects of my own, which now seemed tame or commercial.

When moments like this happen, I'm aware I'm not necessarily thinking of the characters or the plot, but of the general mood or curious feelings they stirred, the ideas which they sparked, the thoughts which led to other thoughts. I wanted my novel to burrow into this mystery mental location.

While the elements of change and our perception of old and new reoccur in my novel, these elements do not, for me, satisfactorily sum up the space within which my novel sits and the fact that I can't pin it down ultimately suggests I succeeded. I feel I have ended up with something both experimental and readable. The misdirection and avoidance of the normal routes have resulted in the novel carrying the unsettling feeling that the familiar is never static; it is neither old nor new. My novel walks a fine line between known and unknown. When it approaches the familiar, it veers away from it. What's the use of visiting the known time and time again? How will anything new ever be created if everyone writes in comfortable, containable and nameable forms?

I think about the known/unknown and look back for explanations to the bare bones biography of my life. I was born in 1976 in Manchester. I spent as number of years between around eight and sixteen appearing in theatre, TV and radio productions. My teenage years were occupied in musical performances and composition. I have a BA & MA in contemporary music and creative writing, have played several hundred gigs in duos, bands and solo in UK and Europe, released five solo albums of original music, written a few obscure poetry collections and three unpublished novels.

The bare bones details to me are quite dull and normal because they represent the known. For me, there is no mystery or intrigue in my life when I look back, because I have been present the whole time, living it. The narrative of my past is more illuminating than the facts because the isolated moments become vignettes, chapters and scenes from my life as viewed and interpreted by me. Often I don't see the importance or relevance of these episodes until much later on. It's quite possible that one day in the future, I will look back on something I have created and connect it to the time I saw a Lukas Moodysson film, but for now, I can't see that link.

When I was four years old, I had an emergency tracheotomy. It was sudden and unexpected, just 'one of those things' and I was unable to speak, mute for a short period. I'm not sure if I was silenced for weeks or months. I was a child, so anything longer than ten minutes was an eternity. I spent a lot of this time writing notes and stories for myself and my family; barely legible spidery scrawls on stacks of paper. Given a choice between being bedbound, maudlin and weepy, like some of the children in the ward or something else, I stumbled into something else, my first creative output. A creative unknown, an audience, consisting of whoever was there to read the stream of words. Behind the scrawly writing, the stream of words said, "I'm here! Silent but here. Now check out this poem."

I also discovered how entertaining chaos can be while in hospital. One morning, armed with two reams of A4 paper I silently encouraged the other children to make paper aeroplanes. 1000 sheets of paper were clearly more than enough, but we all ripped the sheets in half and set about making 2000 planes and then, in a scene reminiscent of a Marx Brothers film, proceeded to fill the ward with our little white missiles. The nurses were far from pleased when they noticed what had happened and several bin bags had to be filled with the crumbled mess. Chaos and art can sit side by side. This moment was as entertaining as the creating and I couldn't predict the outcome of either of these 'pointless' acts, so carried on with them both.

A couple of years later, when I was about six years old I actively sought out the unknown on the off chance it would be interesting or exciting. I wanted to discover secrets. Things were far more alluring when they were out of reach and unknown. This desire is present when we are adults too. Films and fiction rely on our inquisitive nature when they hold information back and epic length TV series depend almost entirely on the curiosity of their viewers watching episode after episode in the hope that answers will be given. Back then, if someone mentioned they had a secret, I wanted to know what it was. However, the moment I knew it, it was always a little disappointing, it was still a secret to other people, but to me it wasn't a secret anymore, it was the known.

On rare occasions in fiction, everything is revealed from the outset like in *The Virgin Suicides*;

"On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing

exactly where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope"[118]

Having the whole story revealed in the first sentence can startle the reader, but even in these cases, we are dubious and suspect there's probably a lot more of the tale still being withheld. We have an instinctive feeling that that there has to be something more to it than this and because we believe there's something missing and we want to know, we read on to experience the different angles of the facts we have already been presented with.

I don't believe that my six-year-old secret search is unusual, it is an endless human trait to want to know the unknown, because knowing the known isn't particularly satisfying. It's like having a magic trick revealed to you. Once the answer is explained, the mind moves on instantly to something else. I mulled over the idea of the unknowable and secrets. Could there be such a thing as a secret which was mine, but that even I didn't know? At six years old I didn't have much of a past and hadn't read Louis Mink, who, writing about history, believed the past to be entirely made up of unknown knowledge, but now, I can cast my line into pools of past and try and make some sense of these moments. Occasionally these pieces of the past shed new light on things I thought I knew, but now viewed from a different angle, these moments of self-discovery, come close to being a secret about me that even I didn't know.

When I was about 12 years old, cycling home one day in the school summer holidays, I remember approaching the junction of four main roads near my house. There was lots of traffic and I pedalled as fast as possible, took my hands off the handlebars, put them behind my head, closed my eyes and thought *if this really is a good day, then I'll live*. In less than a second, I shot through the crossroads, to the sound of horns and tyre screeches. My life

[118] Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Virgin Suicides.*

could have been considerably shorter. But as it turned out, that day *was* a good day. I look back at this moment as another kind of crossroads. I could have died, I could have forgotten about this moment. I could also have taken it as a sign, that a higher power was protecting me and announced myself as the new messiah. Thankfully, I did not. I like to think most of us act on these impulse thoughts, both as a child and as an adult. A sudden pondering; *I wonder if this is too hot to touch, I wonder if this is a shortcut, I wonder if these two things will taste good together, I wonder what's inside a vacuum and can sound pass through it?*

When I was 17 years old, I would walk the two or three miles back home through familiar streets each night. At some point, partly to pass the time and partly to experience the unfamiliar, I began to amuse myself by closing my eyes and seeing how far I could get. Listening to the echo of my footsteps bouncing off buildings and parked cars, using the changing light conditions from the orange streetlights above me and the feel of the terrain underfoot to determine where I was. This game evolved into feeling the shape of coins in my pocket to identify which coins and which side (heads or tails) they were without looking, along with dialling phone numbers without looking at the numbers. I would eventually be able to walk the entire three miles home without opening my eyes.

A few months later, I got stupendously drunk on a litre of Vodka. The next day at college, I started to go blind. Within an hour, the centre of my vision become blurry and then all I could see was red and black. Instead of panicking, I felt rather pleased with myself that I'd actually unwittingly prepared for this eventuality and could get by without telling anyone. It was a secret and the unknown all rolled into one. I followed the sound of the voices of those who spoke to me, made tiny illegible scrawls on my pad to give an impression that I was taking notes and when the lecture was over, followed the sound of people leaving, found a twenty pence piece and called my doctors and a taxi from the nearest payphone. I

found myself a character suddenly placed in the middle of a story. There had been an unexpected change in the plot, but rather than panicking and thinking 'why is this happening to me?' I had taken control of the typewriter and was bashing away at the keys to write the next scene. The phrase 'you are the author of your own life story' wasn't just a cheesy motivational quote. At home, the familiar surroundings of my bedroom were no obstacle for my lack of sight. I effortlessly located instruments, jack leads, headphones, set levels by touch and recorded some music. This wasn't the unknown. Two days later, my sight came back.

Patterns of my life stories repeat: when I was about twenty I worked a night shift job. I came home on my motorbike at five in the morning. Maybe it was because I was tired, maybe it was because it was a gorgeous summer morning and I was remembering being a little kid, but on the empty countryside road, I saw nothing for at least a mile, ahead or behind in my mirror and began to wonder how far I could travel with my eyes closed. I rode quite a distance before the camber of the road alerted me that I was drifting to the right hand side, towards the kerb. Another good day.

There are two types of story I am recalling here. One is creating things; art or chaos, the other is curiosity or inquisitiveness, a thirst for knowledge. They run alongside each other like railway lines. Occasionally they split and veer off to other locations but they always seem to meet each other again.

My creating behaviour, which as time went by become my creative process, may have begun as an idle doodle or a little tune I couldn't stop humming, but before long it was several minutes long or had become a self-contained slice of thought in words, melody or lyrics, which as I got older I understood to be called a poem or a musical composition. I have to stress here that I believe *all* children do this. All children babble and make up little rhymes

or songs. It was a normal everyday occurrence for me to play or sing a song I had written. I played to myself and to anyone who wanted to listen. One time when I was around seven years old, I went missing. My parents spent a few hours patrolling the estate looking for me, asking other children if they'd seen me and were close to calling the police when they spotted me in a house playing an impromptu gig to a family in their living room. I don't recall my intention or motivation for performing to these strangers. It seemed a normal thing to do with or without an audience.

Children have a tendency to sing and draw and make things up, but a mysterious chasm slowly begins to open up as we get older. Social groups form and people generally want to be a part of those groups and not appear unusual. In the case of my own childhood, being good at football was praised, being able to double track your own vocals on songs you'd written wasn't. Owning a Mongoose BMX or Adidas trainers was cool, owning albums by Steve Reich and Frank Zappa was met with total confusion. Although my friends at school tolerated my creative behaviour, it was always looked upon slightly suspiciously and to be placed in the same category as childish traits such as thumb sucking or sleeping with a soft toy, i.e. something you were supposed to grow out of. Not for any justifiable or explainable reason I may add, would the world really be that different if adults sucked their thumbs and slept in beds full of furry animals?

Being creative wasn't exactly encouraged at my high school: in my first year, I handed in a three page creative writing essay in which I'd used a one word sentence followed by a two word sentence, a three word and so on. I received the essay back with red marks all over and '*What is this???????*' written at the bottom, along with a fail grade. Evidently, it wasn't meant to be *that* creative.

Four years later, not learning my lesson, my GCSE English exam included three opening sentences for a short story, which were something along the lines of "Amanda waved goodbye to her parents as the ship sailed away from the harbour…." I didn't particularly like any of the opening sentences. I enjoyed writing but wasn't inspired to churn out a yarn about Amanda or her parents. Instead, I began my story "'*Amanda waved goodbye to her parents as the ship sailed away'* read the tattoo on Clive's Arm…" and then continued in a more interesting direction. I had to re-sit the exam the next year, learning the hard way that in general, exams are simply a box ticking exercise and not a venue for creative anti-establishment behaviour. Creating outside of the boundaries ultimately resulted in a fail.

This continued to be the backdrop throughout school. From what I recall, there were no pupils who wanted to be actors or visual artists and there were only two or three who were interested in music, which didn't mean creative exploration; it meant the logical sequence of studying graded exams in violin, piano or cello, which would result in a GCSE which led to college and university. The general unspoken message was that anything that didn't lead to paid employment wasn't worth learning. So whereas most people get older and cease doing these 'useless' or 'childish' things, I just continued. The question really shouldn't be why I still create things, but why other people stop.

I continued making music and writing because the other pastimes my friends were engaged in such as sports or education had such strict rules and boundaries. If you wanted to be nurse, snooker player or solider, there were set pathways which were always the same and had no scope for being creative. During one of the few times I ever played football, I suggested to my friends that we introduce two balls to see what happened. I valiantly tried for about an hour to convince them to experiment, interested to see how players would

react, defend, attack or plan ahead with the same number of players but two balls in motion. The idea was dismissed with repeated shouts of “but that’s not the rules of football.”

“I *know* it isn’t,” I told them, “but someone invented the current rules of football and someone invented rugby by rewriting the football rules, they didn’t *always* exist, nothing bad is going to happen if we break the rules for a moment.”

On this occasion I failed in inventing a new sport. Music and writing offered an unlimited potential to be creative. I have recordings of me from 1980, discovering chord formations and working out time signatures as I play and sing. I have long pieces of fiction written in the early hours of the morning when I should have been studying or sleeping. Aimless streams of words heading to an unknown place, coursing out of the end of my pen like I were merely an observer in the process. Some people chain smoke, I seem to chain make. I chain record and document. I have over twenty years of diaries, explaining and detailing my and other people’s lives in great detail, but have seldom thought who is ever going to read these words, because for the most part, they are written in a form which a stranger could just pick up and read. These writings are is useful for me to explain my own thoughts in clear ways to myself. Putting pen to paper, turning thoughts into words doesn’t just document something, it enlightens the writer. For me, the mere action of describing a moment of my life can be like stepping back and seeing it from someone else’s point of view, a way of identifying that the strange mix of emotions was in fact jealousy or love or fear. I can dip into a diary to revisit moments from my past and sometimes remind myself how wrong my memory is when thinking about an insignificant event from fifteen years ago.

These documents are my cave paintings, my notches in stone to say I was here. They clarify the past to myself as much as to a reader. I can speculate on ancient cave paintings and sculptures and wonder who their intended audience may have been, if their creators

were thinking of their creations existing only in the present, their present, or if they looked ahead to the immediate future or the distant future which we are now in, but there will never be a single answer. People create things for many reasons, for themselves and for others, for money, for respect, but I believe that like curiosity, the majority of humans everywhere go through the same primal actions; making, marking, recording and telling, and that this behaviour, which comes in a multitude of formats, is no different to the way cats patrol their territory or knead their paws in the same way they pawed their mother as kittens to stimulate milk. They do this automatically and don't consider why they are doing it. Put a child in a room with nothing but a crayon and before long they will start to draw, start to talk to themselves or sing. Humans everywhere in every age have made things they called art. Things made of shapes, sounds and ideas which have no real use and whose value is judged by those who create them and others who appreciate them.

I look back at my behaviour and the think that the five-year old me made a wise choice with writing and music. They are two endless areas of exploration to channel my curiosity. If I burn myself out writing something I can spend time recording and vice versa. There will always be one off self-contained off projects to be explored.

In 2002-5 I distributed my poetry by way of droplifting, that is, the opposite of shoplifting; I would sneak copies into magazines sat on the shelves in shops, the magazines were bought and the poems were found. This action can be described as largely pointless, I was not advertising or promoting any specific product for any financial gain, it was simply entertaining. The thousands of small booklets I had printed stated they were free with the magazine, which technically they were. I received emails from people who had read my poems and enjoyed them, some from people who hated them so much they made the effort to let me know in person and several letters from magazine publishers who were very

annoyed with me but evidently couldn't demand I cease my actions because I didn't seem to be breaking any specific law. It was amusing while it lasted but in the long run it involved more effort, expense and time than I had at my disposal. It was a nice moment of chaos though. It was something I chose to set in motion and had no idea what would happen or where it would lead.

To wrap up these interlocking tales of my life, when I was thirty-seven, I went deaf. A week became months and I grew very angry. Not because I knew there was clearly a serious undiagnosed problem, but because sound was gone. I couldn't identify the direction of voices, couldn't focus on conversation in a crowded place, couldn't cycle in traffic because I couldn't hear if cars were coming or going, couldn't cook without burning things because I relied so much on the sizzle and hiss of the food. I was angry because something I knew existed, sound, no longer existed to me. The known became the unknown.

What levels of the unknown were to be explored? At first, to see if it was possible and because I quite like a challenge, I continued performing live. I managed to play four gigs hearing nothing but the muddy soup of noise within my head (musical notes, breathing and whooshing of blood flow) hoping that the sound engineer was mixing my vocals and guitar properly. Looking at the video footage I seemed pull off this mammoth challenge, but it was mentally exhausting playing, singing and rapping things that I could not hear and I cancelled my future bookings and concentrated my efforts writing and recording music instead. I relied on the electronic guitar tuner and vibrations when the instrument was against my head, became dependant on the sight of the digital meter levels but was unable to record vocals or mix any of my pieces. I continued to chronicle events in my diary and slugged away in the silent world of fiction.

The occurrences that unfurled in the next few months were unpleasant but fairly interesting: trying to state in words the sensation of having a bone marrow biopsy and the lurching of the mind as it grapples with the feeling of slowly being poisoned by strange chemicals in the bloodstream were definitely not dull moments. They would, no doubt, have got dull if they happened every week, but in that scenario, something else of interest would have popped up. There was also a certain amount of mental chaos, which I had to make sense of. It was a busy time but I managed to continue with the novel and record a bunch of songs which, one day I hoped I would be able to hear.

After the first cycle of chemotherapy my hearing returned. I lay feeling like death on the bathroom floor, ecstatic that I could hear the dripping of the tap in stereo. The familiar sounds were back. The known was there again but the curiosity of the unknown was still present, like a mosquito, buzzing round my head. The IV bags of chemo dripped into my veins and I took the antisickness pills after the first cycle. But against all logic and judgment, taking into account I was probably going to feel a lot worse, I started to wonder what would happen if I didn't take these pills for the second cycle. It was another 'eyes closed and hands off the handlebars' moment. I had to step into the unknown for a moment. I couldn't just Google it or settle for merely wondering, I *had* to know. I *had* to investigate. I didn't take the pills. If you ever find yourself in this scenario, I can now save you the research and report that you just get more intensely sicker a lot quicker. Still, it was a choice that I had discovered; 36 hours of nagging queasiness or 12 hours of crippling sickness. I chose the latter from thereon. It gave me more time to write and record.

So, at various points of my life, like a 21st century fable, I've been (rather conveniently for this purposes of this story) temporarily mute, blind and deaf. And throughout each of these horrible periods, I still had the overwhelming urge to create and to investigate. It's a

relentless drive. Sometimes I find answers and it's interesting, sometimes it's not, sometimes I'm led elsewhere, sometimes it's amusing, sometimes it's a lesson learned and saves to avoid something else in the future. Most of the time however it's like walking into a dark room, creatively guessing the terrain or thrashing around in the unknown and later on, leaving the room with something that didn't exist before. A piece of music, a chapter, a sequence of thoughts. The known/unknown and creating are always present in some shape or form.

Sometimes the action itself is a distraction for me while I am creating something: In my MA novel I wanted to see if I could write a chapter where every sentence began with the last word of the previous sentence and I also wondered if could do this skilfully so nobody would notice it. Other times, the path itself is longer: I wondered if I could write the next novel without naming the narrator, I wondered if I could tell the story from the end to the beginning. On many occasions, it is just a desire to discover a piece of useless information: A few years ago, I wondered if my band could rehearse in pitch black with a strobe light flashing. Again, to save you the discomfort of this experiment, the guitarists will be fine but the drummer will struggle to keep the beat because the images their brain is trying to process do not correspond with their movements or speed of the song. Approximately half the band will end up violently vomiting after an hour. The knowledge may never be useful to me but discovering it was. It just became something I had now experienced and would never have to wonder about in the future.

We are human and want to tell and hear stories, in their hundred different guises, some more than others, but we are all the same. I am not claiming to be unique; I am one of billions of human beings all over the world. I believe we all think in a similar way. Some of us push our bodies and become athletes, climb mountains, row across oceans or figure out

ways to get into space. Others push their minds and become brilliant criminals, thinkers or artists. At some point today in Iran or Japan or Fiji, a little kid will probably be taking their hands off the handlebars and closing their eyes for a moment.

Of course, as is to be expected, some of these individuals die. Two children in my own school died from such inquisitive behaviour before the age of 12; one boy wondered if he could walk across a frozen lake without the ice breaking (he couldn't), the other, despite the endless TV warnings showing the consequences, wondered if he could climb a pylon without getting electrocuted (again, he couldn't). Things could go wrong, we don't always know if this guessing will pay off, how serious the consequences are, if the third rail is electrified or not, but time and time again we take the risk.

Our lives are like snowballs. They consist of a million snowflakes stories, unique and squashed together to form a shape, which is who we are. These snowflake stories are crisscrossing, interlocked and uniquely perceived components of our identity but from arm's length they just resemble snowballs and all look alike. For millennia, we have converted what is known and what is unknown into narrative in order to understand or at the very least, comfort ourselves with the belief that we think we understand and are ultimately in some way in control of our life and the world around us.

Being in control of our own creations is important too. As a child, we don't give too much thought as to why things happen or why we behave the way we do. Children just get on with things without much self-reflection.

As the 1980's went by I spent more and more time in TV studios and theatres but felt there was something which wasn't quite satisfying. I couldn't convey exactly what it was. In fact, I didn't spend *any* time even considering what it may have been. Had I written a diary

back then, I would probably have nailed the reason pretty quickly when trying to articulate it in actual words. But back then it became annoying in some way that I couldn't explain.

It wasn't the money: my school friends worked for hours and hours each morning doing milk or paper rounds in exchange for about a few pounds a week, while I simply took a few days off school, sat around in a dressing room, worked for a few minutes and earned a few hundred quid. It wasn't the lack of job security: the adult actors were constantly fretting about when and where their next audition or job might be, I was a kid so couldn't care less. The work didn't even seem like work, it was fun and easier than being at school: learn a script, act it out in front of cameras or people and go home.

I think that for me, there needs to be a period of time to step back and try and work things out. In the present moment, I make choices based on instinct, impulse and brief consideration for the immediate future. Only when I look back on these moments do I see the sense or the bigger picture. Now I reflect on it thirty years later, I see that I was probably unsatisfied because these words, these characters, scripts and stories, were someone else's. I was directed by someone else, dressed as someone else and spoke as someone else. Obviously, this is why it's called acting, but creatively, it felt like a massive artistic anti-climax after weeks of personal exploring, discovering and improvising, none of which the audience saw.

I didn't want to receive any praise I got, I didn't write these words. I was a puppet, *complement the author, not me,* I thought. I recall that the most soul destroying and unrewarding work of all was the catwalk and modelling shoots where I was nothing more than a living coat hanger, a nameless, walking blank canvas to show off someone else's creations and sell products. On the plus side, I could afford books, records, drum kits, guitars, keyboards and recording equipment.

Although I did get the opportunity to write some music for a couple of theatre productions, I never made any attempt to write any scripts; that direction seemed, to the pre-teen me, so impossible and lengthy a process, involving a large amount of people, organizations and incalculable amounts of money. The productions I was involved with stood on one side of the fence belonging to someone else and I stood on the other side with my music and writing, which were achievable, almost immediate and more importantly, were my own words or ideas. When I wrote, I didn't have to consider the commercial potential or viability of the things I made then or how they would be performed or presented. At the time, my audience consisted of me and anyone else I played my music to.

Although I was regularly performing, the first time I played one of my own compositions to anyone other than my family or friends was around 1988. My music teacher pressed me to play a tape of one of my songs to a class of older children, to show them what I was doing. The sound blared out of the speakers: an acapella piece consisting of eight multitracked vocal parts laden with delay. It was the first chance I'd had to see an audience reaction to something I had created. Most of the class liked it, some of them were perplexed that it didn't have a drum beat, one of them hated it. There weren't many other opportunities for a 12 year old to showcase their experimental sound collages though so it wasn't until a few years later when I began playing live in pubs and clubs that I encountered a real audience again. Until then, my acting was seen and heard by people and my music and writing wasn't.

A few years ago I started to think about this period of my life. I didn't write a diary then and wondered if my memories from these years had been warped and distorted by time. This turned into an urge to revisit this world and after an audition, I suddenly found myself cast in a lead role in a short film. The week of filming was, for me, permeated with a

strange feeling of Déjà vu. It was a very familiar setting, occupied by a very familiar type of person, which I was now viewing as an adult. It was a bit like putting on an old t-shirt or revisiting your old primary school and the smell of the building unleashing memories you'd forgotten all about. It was interesting, but ultimately my memory was correct and it was time spent watching other people in the process of creating things. It only made me more eager to get on with my own projects and get back to being myself.

Looking back at these childhood years, I see connections that I hadn't noticed before. Was there a link between acting and some of my more reckless behaviour? Had spending so much time living out the unreal in the fantasy world of TV and theatre, somehow seeped into my real life? A psychoanalyst would no doubt be more qualified to answer that one, but I can clearly see the transition of thoughts that spilled into my musical philosophy as I turned down acting jobs and concentrated my efforts on music and writing.

I saw no connection at the time, but this was when I made an unbreakable personal rule that any musical venture I was involved with, would be original music, either written by myself or my band. Everywhere I looked, there were always more than enough people playing other people's music and hardly any playing their own. I would still learn how to play other people's compositions to see how they worked, but would never play these songs live. It was too similar to acting a role.

All the while, acting or not, creating went on as it always had with me, I constantly wrote things and some of the time, people got to hear or read these things. I gave little consideration to what my agent thought as I turned down auditions and jobs. She must have got the idea though, and after a while stopped calling. The scripts I'd learned remained part of someone else's story, they were someone else's characters, someone else's creations and

although they needed other people to bring them to life, like cover bands, there were always plenty of other people happy to do this. I got back to my own story.

Living your own story doesn't always mean you are writing it or even aware of the plot. It was only recently when writing about my writing, that I noticed how I'd been applying my musical composition techniques to fiction. Even then, it was not conscious knowledge. Like diary writing, the revelation came in converting thoughts into words, which then made me realize what was happening. I was simply applying the tools I had been using from composing instrumental music, using melodies which did not have any literal meaning or translate into any definable theme and knitting them into a larger structure. In music, I like to play around with chunks, pieces, riffs, motifs, textures, repetitions and rhythms. Take enough of the right pieces and put them together in the right way and you end up with something different. It all makes perfect sense now though. Of c*ourse* I would try and apply the same techniques when writing the novel.

The rough idea I began with became the boundaries I worked within, the piece evolved as I wrote and there were occasional accidental additions along the way, which sometimes needed to be edited out. Like music, I wasn't thinking of the performablilty of the piece, just of the piece as an eventual whole, as a recording.

Subsequent rewrites were like remixing the piece, smoothing angles, bringing out certain parts and toning down others. The draft as it stands is also like a piece of music in that it is subjective. Some readers will enjoy the novel, others won't. Some readers may find it difficult to care about the brief fragments of the Seller clan, not investing time in characters who they know are going to die in the chapter they are reading. Others may find it difficult to care about the plight of the seemingly immortal, nameless narrator. Some will find themselves caring about Lizzie and possibly be touched by the brief, close relationship

between her and the narrator which has been placed carefully in the in the middle of the novel like the centre of a flower. She was created as a character who exists as the most normal, human character in the novel and possibly the only one that the reader can relate to. I hope this then triggers and sets in motion thoughts and connections to other thoughts, because the thoughts sparked by the novel, will become part of someone else in the same way that every piece of music I have heard or written, every book I have read or film I've seen has added something to the way I think. Friends, enemies and people who have long since forgotten about me have all played a part in my outlook, an accumulation of events which has shaped the way I speak and create for myself and for other people.

Why, why and again why? Why do I keep creating, even if sometimes only I will see or hear the work, even when it may be a struggle to create such as when I'm sick? It's simple, it's what I do and nothing seems to get in the way of it. Creating things is a part of me, which I don't ever remember not being there. It isn't dependant on having a guitar, pen, paper or even an audience. It's a spark of an idea, an urge to create something and sometimes a way of perceiving the world.

Music was a mysterious thing to me as a child when I first began picking out notes and chords on guitars and keyboards. It was a wordless enjoyment, the kind that children have when they jump into the sea or taste popping-candy. My wordless fascination of intervals, chords and rhythms never went away. Thirty-five years later I am still mesmerized when a collection of notes and rhythms come together and sound good for inexplicable reasons. The same applies for writing. By the time thoughts have been transformed into words, they are something slightly different from their original form. It's a complex and mysterious process trying to translate these wordless musings into black and white letters but it's never boring. If it got boring I would stop doing it.

When we are young, everything is wonderful, exciting, new and mysterious. Tastes, sounds and sensations are all fascinating. As we get older, we discover new enjoyment and leave these little pleasures behind and I would say, lose a little zest for life in the process. I try not to forget that it isn't the little things themselves that changed, it's only our perception of them. Children generally focus their attention on the immediate world, a world without time, which spans a metre radius around them. A new felt tip pen, studying the colour of an apple or a handful of sand can be enthralling. These things won't seem as exciting to an adult when compared to a two week holiday in a foreign country because our focus and interpretation of the world is no longer the same. Some people follow sports all their lives. Endless games of football, similar events reoccurring over and over with slightly different players. For me, something like a stack of blank paper is far more exciting. It was exciting when I was child and is still exciting now as an adult. Blank paper represents a starting point for anything you can imagine. It is the gateway to unknown creative directions, while to most people its blankness represents a lack of information. A pile of blank paper is anything but boring.

I like to think I have somehow retained an element of this childlike way of thinking. Creating things for me is not necessarily a way of making sense of the world but keeping the thought at the forefront of my mind that the world is still a new and exciting place with so many things to discover, create and enjoy. I have to admit that coming from an adult, this idea reeks of hippy or religious sentiment. I think of it more like the tenacious mischievous excitement that a Labrador dog possesses; easily entertained by small things combined with intelligence and not a hint of religious tree hugging involved.

Adults mostly think within the box for functional reasons. I'm not suggesting that everyone should behave in this childlike way. Staring at apples for extended periods of time

and creating moments of chaos for amusement would bring civilization to a grinding halt pretty quickly, but I think it's important that we remember that a choice is always there. To remember the boundaries of the box we are supposed to think within, just in case we want to think outside it. To ask questions as a reader and as a writer. As a performer and as an audience.

When I start to think about the concept of an audience/reader I suddenly see how much of a slippery concept it is to me. My perspective has been shaped/skewed by my past. To put it succinctly, the television, theatre, radio and films I acted in all had audiences, but they consisted of tens of thousands of unknown and mostly unseen people. My droplifted poetry books were read by people that again, I didn't know or see. My live gigs in out of town venues are filled with people I don't know and never see again and finally, because of the internet, my music has been listened to or purchased by people scattered across world, but are ultimately an unseen and unknown audience who do not exist in any single location.

I don't forget that I am part of an audience, both of my own work and the art I enjoy which other people have made. I want to create the same standard of work that I expect to find from others. I'm not happy making something functional, cutting corners and skimping on ingredients and don't expect other artists to do this either.

Sometimes when I create something, I recall several large-scale theatre productions I was involved in as a child and the total contempt which some of the hack producers and musical directors had for their audiences. They would openly refer to the crowds as "fucking idiots who would sit through anything," as they hastily wrote tenuous links to shoehorn songs from unrelated shows into their productions. "Nobody cares if it makes sense, nobody will notice," one of them would regularly tell us as he tore pages out of a script. I saw no art or even love of art in these kinds of shows, only concern about ticket sales. Even at eight

years old it offended me as an audience and as a creator of things, that these so-called professionals had such little interest in anything other than filling stage time as quickly as possible so we could all go home. Sometimes, there was no creativity to be found in the combination of dance, music and acting, only a projected image that something creative had occurred. *Give the punters something to tap their foot to, nothing else is necessary* rang in my ears for a long time as a sentiment I wanted to avoid whenever possible.

I'm well aware that western society is very much geared towards marketing and selling products, and creative art is no exception. It's generally acceptable to spend time making a functional item such as a table or a boat and do it for your own pleasure, but to write a song for your own pleasure is still a concept that doesn't quite sit right with many people. It's ok to sit around that table you just made, what are you going to do with that short story? Are songs and stories only for audiences or to be bought, consumed, sold or evaluated?

At college and university, fellow writers and musicians often asked me what I was doing, if I replied, I was writing, the response was usually, "Why? You're not going to be marked on that," as if the only time it was acceptable to create something was when it was being graded.

I wrote *River* with no image of a reader, but would like to think that the novel could be appreciated by a person looking for an intriguing read. The kind of person who upon reading a predictable and formulaic blurb, puts the book back on the shelf and continues their search, not really knowing what it is they are looking for. Someone who cares about what they are reading and is looking for an alternative experience or literary journey. Someone who might enjoy a collection of poems they found in a magazine. A publisher's nightmare: the unknown/minority market. This reader will hopefully delve into my novel and

find a payoff. This won't necessarily be the same payoff for all readers. My payoff may just be a thought provoking experiment, a set of counter culture questions, an exercise or a distraction.

When we read a novel, we automatically and unconsciously cross-reference it against previous stories we have encountered. But life itself isn't a story. We can view parts of it as a progressing narrative, but it isn't planned out and can sometimes be quite directionless. We are applying the forms to the factual world. Several thespian themed years lead nowhere in my own history. Life doesn't adhere to the conventions of a neat flowing story. I wasn't preparing for plot progression in subsequent chapters. Time went by in the moment, I made music and wrote. We see narrative in our own past but rarely apply it to project our own futures. Is it because we don't know the boundaries of our own existences, where the middle or end lies, in order to imagine or plan in a successive, logical and worthwhile arc?

I used to wonder how mankind discovered the laborious, complex and completely unnatural method of making bread, how anyone could have naturally spent time making a flourlike substance from grains, mixing the powder with water and discovering yeast to end up with a ball of dough and then cooking it. I now believe that people tackle a problem in slightly different ways but given enough time, be it minutes or centuries, the problem gets honed and refined. The resultant edible starchy mass may become flatbread, loaves, buns or sticks which could be baked, fried or steamed but are all what you'd call bread. Everyone ends up with pretty similar snacks.

We will forever try and sum things up in neat little fables like scorpion and the frog tale. The scorpion asks the frog to carry him across the river. The frog is worried that the scorpion will sting and kill him but agrees to help. Halfway across the river, the scorpion stings and kills the frog and then drowns. Why? Because it's the nature of the scorpion,

that's how the story ends. And the same applies for humans; we are the way we are. But it isn't as simple as comparing mankind to a scorpion. Things are a little more complex than that. We have more instincts: to compete, to discover, to love, to reproduce and to defend amongst them. We are the scorpion *and* the frog. We know the dangers involved and still go ahead with things. We wonder, and mull, risk, ponder and experiment. Sometimes we fall through the ice, other times we discover a new land on the other side of the ice. We kill ourselves discovering ionizing radiation, save people by discovering penicillin and all stops in-between.

I feel the collaborative process between the reader and the writer is changing; the writer can be the reader of their own work and shape it accordingly. When writing my diary I sometimes find myself in a strange battle against reading significance or continuity into of the small events or comments of the present day and their possible context in bigger picture of life, fighting the urge to find a story which is not there. I am not thinking ahead to whether or not someone will understand the meaning of my words, but if I myself will understand, in perhaps twenty years, what I am trying to convey at that moment. With my novel it is different. It is a narrative built upon a stack of hopes or presumptions; that the reader will know or be led to understand what I am trying to say and that they will read around or into the words. They, in effect, become the writer of these missing pieces. I hope they will enjoy the writing but if they dislike it, that they will seek out someone else's writing or write something themselves.

Ultimately though, I now realize that it may just be a response I hope to achieve on this occasion. It's not of great importance that the reader agrees with me or likes my work as long as they ask their own questions and question me and can see how much I care about the things I have put together. It's a response I may never be aware of. A response, which

upon further thought, is no different from a little kid poking a sleeping animal, or me aged five handing out my scribbled thoughts to those sat by my hospital bed. A childlike curiosity and a life affirming, “I’m here” combined with “Look, you’re here too.” A connection. A connection between the known and the unknown.

I will admit that have only just realized this but am happy that this positive undercurrent is present in my work. I create because I like to do it. It’s enjoyable trying to solve these complex artistic puzzles which have no rules. It’s a good feeling to be chasing the secret, closing your eyes and moving forward into the unknown. There will always be a mystery place, real or imagine to go to. My next project will be different, will veer away from the things I have written before, avoid the familiar comfort zones.

Each of our own worlds revolve around ourselves and as time goes by it sometimes feels that we are the only constant. Our surroundings, friends and family may change but we are very much like the river in my novel: the same and yet simultaneously in flux. My novel is finished. My research is never finished. There will always be a generic norm to push against, there will always be good and bad art which will inspire me to create my own, there will always be a void to be filled or explored. I will continue to write and find more and more unknown places.

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Timeline in chronological order:

River PART THREE

1720 Narrator born
1743 Narrator is 24, Henry Seller is 24, 1720 - 1743 – Death by rock
1764 Narrator is 45, John Seller is 22, 1743 – 1764 – Death by cleaver
1793 Narrator is 74, John Seller is 30, 1764 – 1793 – Death by gun

River PART TWO

1830 Narrator is 111, Thomas Seller is 38, 1793 – 1830 – Death by Fire
1848 Narrator is 129, George Serrer is 19, 1830 – 1848 – death by train
Lizzie
1883 Narrator is 164, William Sarah is 35, 1848 – 1883 – Death by arsenic

River PART ONE

1926 Narrator is 207, Albert Serah is 44, 1883 – 1926 – Death by drowning
1955 Narrator is 236, James Serrah is 29, 1927 – 1955 – Death by stabbing
1995 Narrator is 276, Keith Serrah (1955-) lives.